

Residents feel victimized by pending deal to sell McCarley Gardens



Lorraine Chambley, McCarley Gardens tenant association president, says, “Nobody has told us where they’re going to move us.” Derek Gee/Buffalo News

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By outward appearances, McCarley Gardens is a tranquil townhouse complex in the middle of Buffalo, a neighborhood where people wave to one another while passing on sidewalks, and children laugh on the playground while landscapers cut grass and trim hedges.

But start talking to some of the hundreds of residents there, and it’s quickly apparent that this housing development in the shadow of Buffalo’s medical corridor is in turmoil.

People throughout the region are excited about the new buildings going up on the nearby Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus and the thousands of new employees soon to be working there. But residents of McCarley Gardens feel like collateral damage, a community of low-income blacks and Hispanics tossed aside in the name of progress, and unsure where they will end up.

“I don’t know where they’re going to put us. I’m concerned about that,” said Lorraine Chambley, president of the McCarley Gardens tenant association for the last eight years. “Nobody has told us where they’re going to move us.”

“I don’t want to move,” said Marian Davis, 72, whose front yard is decorated with flower pots, colorful spinners, pink flamingo statuettes and miniature U.S. flags. “I’ve been here six years, and I’m content here.”

Some 35 years after being built, McCarley Gardens – long considered a model for low-income housing – may be on the verge of extinction.

The owner of the housing complex, St. John Baptist Church – one of the largest and most prominent churches in the African-American community – three years ago offered to sell the 15 acres on which McCarley Gardens sits to the University at Buffalo Foundation for \$1 million an acre. The Rev. Michael Chapman, pastor at St. John, has said his church’s development organization would use the proceeds to help revitalize Buffalo’s Fruit Belt and East Side.

UB took Chapman up on the offer, viewing the purchase as a chance to obtain land for unspecified future development on the Medical Campus while also preventing any possibility of the land ending up in the hands of private developers.

The pending sale has been a sore point to many residents, but now that contract talks between UB and St. John Baptist Church have been reopened, there’s pressure on St. John to kill the deal and reports that the church wants more from UB if the sale is to move forward. UB says both sides are discussing changes in the agreement to give St. John’s development arm, Oak-Michigan Housing Development Corp., additional time to develop a federally approved tenant relocation plan, as required by the agreement and by federal law.

“At this point, Oak-Michigan is trying to ascertain how much time they will need,” UB said in a statement.

Trying to take it ‘off the table’

Chapman, who is also head of Oak-Michigan, is saying little publicly about the agreement, beyond issuing a statement that affirms his hopes to help revitalize Buffalo’s East Side.

In a statement this week, Chapman said his goal from the beginning has been to “find ways to ensure that Fruit Belt residents and the minority community participate in and benefit from the development of the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus.”

But several people familiar with the controversy said Chapman has indicated that if he goes forward with the deal, he would like UB to pay more for McCarley Gardens than the \$15

million previously agreed to, and that he wants Oak-Michigan to have a larger role in development of the property, possibly as a co-developer.

Some other African-American community leaders said they would like to see Chapman back away from his agreement to sell McCarley Gardens to UB.

“I want McCarley Gardens taken off the table,” said George K. Arthur, a former Buffalo Common Council president who has met with Chapman on the issue. “I don’t want UB or anyone going there and misusing these people, and causing them to leave a good housing development.”

The Rev. Darius G. Pridgen, the Council member from the Ellicott District, which includes McCarley Gardens, also met with Chapman. Pridgen spoke of what a nice community McCarley Gardens is and said he would prefer that the complex not be sold. However, Pridgen said, it’s not his place to tell Chapman what St. John should do. But Pridgen said he told Chapman that if St. John does sell the housing complex, it must work with the residents.

“If people of McCarley Gardens don’t want to move, and St. John’s desires to sell, my focus would be on St. John’s working with the people of McCarley Gardens for a smooth transition,” Pridgen said. “The first priority has to be the people of McCarley Gardens.”

When The Buffalo News recently went to McCarley Gardens to talk with people who live there, residents criticized the plan to sell their housing complex, as well as Chapman for supporting the sale.

“I feel the church turned their backs on us,” said Angela Hill, 56, a McCarley Gardens resident for the last 20 years.

“Chapman is selling us out,” said Chambley, 55.

“Right now, ... my problem is I don’t trust” UB or St. John, she said. “They have to gain our trust because we’ve been jerked around too much.”

Deadline for plan is missed

McCarley Gardens was built by St. John Baptist Church in 1978. The development contains about 150 units, populated mainly by blacks and Hispanics. It is bounded by Michigan Avenue and Oak, Goodell and Virginia streets, on the edge of the Medical Campus.

Chapman approached UB in 2009, and in 2010 agreed to sell the parcel to UB for \$15 million for future Medical Campus expansion, according to UB.

The agreement calls for St. John to demolish the buildings and provide UB with a shovel-ready site by 2017.

Because McCarley Gardens is a federally subsidized development, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development requires that the church relocate all tenants to housing that is equal to or better than their current housing at no extra cost to residents. The relocation plan requires HUD approval.

Sale of the property, under the 2010 agreement, is contingent upon St. John developing the approved tenant relocation plan by June 7, 2013. The contract gives St. John until 2017 to move residents, and turn the land over to UB.

But St. John missed the June 7 deadline and has not yet developed the required plan. The contract is still in effect and allows for an extension in the time frame for developing the relocation plan, UB officials said. That is happening now.

“UB’s interests in the property are long-term,” university officials said in the statement. “Therefore, the university is willing to wait for the appropriate processes to be completed to ensure that the needs of the residents are being addressed, that the community benefits from the sale of the property and that the sale is aligned with UB’s academic mission and master plan, which calls for the property to be designated for academic and research programming.”

Conflicting information

UB has not cited any specific plans for the 15-acre tract beyond that, but the university has said that the property will not be used as a parking garage and that medical students will not be moved into the McCarley Gardens apartments when residents move out.

At the time the agreement was signed in 2010, Chapman said he would use the \$15 million as seed money for a \$500 million upgrade of the city’s Fruit Belt and East Side neighborhoods.

Chapman also spoke in 2010 of developing a High Street commercial district for minority-owned businesses, 150 new townhouses for McCarley Gardens residents, new recreational facilities, and new infrastructure in the 52-block Fruit Belt neighborhood northeast of McCarley Gardens, on the other side of Michigan Avenue. Chapman has since obtained federal and city money to build 50 townhouses in the Fruit Belt, but he has subsequently told people that those homes are not for McCarley Gardens residents.

The uncertainty over McCarley Gardens has been difficult for some residents, who say they are given limited and often contradictory information.

Davis, who has lived at McCarley Gardens for six years, said Chapman hasn’t always been honest with tenants. “He tells us one thing today and another thing tomorrow,” she said.

For instance, Chapman said during a public meeting with tenants a couple of years ago that they were going to be moved into the Fruit Belt. “Then he said he’s not sure,” Davis said.

Another time, she said, Chapman told everyone they would have their own basements in the new housing as they do now. But later he changed course and said residents will not have basements or screen doors.

“Don’t tell us we’re going to have everything we got now and more, and then change. For a pastor, that’s a terrible thing,” Davis said.

Chapman was contacted five times for a response, but by late Thursday had not responded to residents’ comments.

Other neighbors also expressed concern about the lack of definitive information about where they will be living.

Several said they do not want to move because McCarley Gardens is more than just a group of townhouses at Goodell and Michigan. It's a tightknit, safe neighborhood where everyone knows each other and keeps an eye on each other's kids, homes and cars.

"I know the people. We're neighbors. We're friends," Hill said as she was tending her rose bushes and vegetable garden.

"We take care of each other," Chambley added. "This is a community. This is not just McCarley Gardens. We take care of each other."

"I feel safe here," said Melissa Camillo, a young mother who moved to McCarley Gardens three years ago.

'No room' in Fruit Belt

If they are forced to move, several residents said, they don't want to go to the Fruit Belt, just east of the Medical Campus.

"There's no room in the Fruit Belt for us," Chambley said.

"There's a lot of gang activity there, a lot of drug-selling," Camillo said.

Davis, however, said the Fruit Belt isn't a bad alternative. "The Fruit Belt is not as bad as people think it is. I lived on Peach Street for at least 15 years. So I can adjust because the Fruit Belt is not as bad," she said.

Several residents, including Davis, also said they don't believe that McCarley Gardens will be torn down once they move out, despite statements to the contrary by UB and Chapman.

"I think UB wants to move white folks to the city," Davis said. "I think they're going to take these places and fix them up and rent them out to medical school students for \$1,000 a month or more."

She said she has seen it before. In the 1960s, she was among 500 low-income residents of Dante Place – then a public housing project.

When the Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority converted it into Marine Drive apartments around 1965, the Dante residents were forcibly relocated to other public housing developments. Marine Drive subsequently became a "middle income" apartment complex – no longer public housing, but still owned by the BMHA.

"And," she said, "they moved white folks down there."

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