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Housing complex wins praise

Former site of lumber company on West Street

Mix of residential, retail

4-story apartment complex to have above-ground parking

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Annapolis officials are hailing a 300-unit apartment project being built on the site of an old lumberyard on West Street as a catalyst for revitalizing a section of the city's western edge more known for car dealerships, fast-food places and other commercial establishments.

Mayor Ellen O. Moyer yesterday praised Westbridge Village - a project on which developers just broke ground - as the first in the area to put the idea of residential and retail mixed use to good use. "West Street is a historic gateway into the city and that corner sets the stage," Moyer said. "The capital city has to set itself apart from the minute you come in."

The four-story apartment complex being built on the former site of J.F. Johnson Lumber Co. at West Street and Chinquapin Round Road will include an above-level parking garage, said the developer, J. Stephen Muller, president of Union Realty in Washington.

Muller said the brick and clapboard one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments, some with loft-style living spaces, would be available at market rates, with rents starting at about \$1,400 a month.

The mayor said the upscale apartment complex would have amenities such as a coffee shop and a dry-cleaning store.

In addition, the city plans to improve the largely asphalt landscape by adding greenery and encouraging more pedestrians and bicyclists with new walkways and lanes.

The project's first phase will be done in a year, and the entire complex will be complete in summer 2006, Muller said. He estimated the cost at more than \$50 million.

For Moyer, supporting the project is a point of civic pride, because West Street is often used as a kind of backdoor into the city's downtown. It doesn't make the best impression right now, she said. She says the old industrial site - 6 or 7 acres - is the right place to start sprucing up the street.

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"Once you have one thing, that sets the tone, so much more follows," Moyer said.

Muller said the trend is toward building closer to city population centers, making urban buildings more chic and efficient. Such development, attractive to single professionals or empty-nesters, has been slow to come to the capital city's housing stock, he said.

"This type of development is being done all over Washington," Muller said. "There's not a lot of land left inside the cities. And this [project] is also recycling an existing asset, an old industrial property.

"We expect it to spur the revitalization of the outer West Street corridor," he said.

Jon Arason, the city's planning director, said Annapolis officials agreed to alter the zoning regulations for the site to allow the construction's density. Public hearings also were held to hear neighborhood comment.

Arason said that other uses proposed for the lumberyard site were a Super Wawa and a car dealership, but neither would further the goal of beautifying and populating that part of West Street.

"We told them no," he said. An artist's drawing shows how West Street might look after plantings, brick walks and a bike lane leading to the center of Annapolis are added.