

Opening Ohringer: community-driven artist project breaks ground in Braddock

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By Lauren Lee / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

It all started with a bang.

On Tuesday, leaders from the state, the county and the borough used gold-painted mallets to smash wooden panels covering the empty windows on the first floor of the once abandoned Ohringer building in Braddock as part of the building's "wall breaking" ceremony.

Formerly a furniture store, the eight-story building is being revamped as affordable housing for 37 artists in an attempt to revitalize the town and attract more business and residents.

Revitalization isn't new to the 2,000 people living in Braddock. In 2007, then-Mayor and current Lt. Gov. John Fetterman tried to carry out a similar plan of converting the building into an affordable housing residence for artists. The plan came to a halt after issues with the building's lease agreement surfaced, and the artists living there had to leave.

Mr. Fetterman spoke to the crowd of about 60 people Tuesday about his history with the building, citing how in July 2001 he ran a GED and job training program there.

"It's really kind of coming full circle to be here today with you," he said.

Mr. Fetterman recalled when the building was first up for auction at a price of \$10,000 —and he was the only bidder.

"And now it's going to be something special for Braddock because that's what Braddock deserves," he said. "Braddock is a truly special place and a place I'm proud to call my family's home."

At the peak of the steel industry, Braddock had an estimated population of 20,000. The town is also home to Andrew Carnegie's first public library, established in 1888. Once the steel mills shut down, people started migrating out of Braddock, leaving behind a small population as well as abandoned stores and apartment buildings.

This time will be different, according to the project's lead developer, Gregg Kander.

Through a combination of low-income-housing tax credits, historic tax credits, and funding from Allegheny County, the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency and First National Bank, Mr. Kander said the project will run smoothly this time with its \$14 million in funding. The project is estimated to be completed by next June.

Plans for the building include the restored original Ohringer's sign, a vacant lot preserved for an art installation, and a roof deck fit for dining and lounging.

Mr. Kander discussed how gentrification in neighborhoods such as Lawrenceville and Squirrel Hill didn't make it a priority to protect the people that were already living there, which is why he wants to make sure this project emphasizes community input.

"People are afraid of gentrification," Mr. Kander said. "We want to make sure we are giving 2,000 residents first priority and the opportunity to have jobs."

Mr. Kander said he will choose 10 community members to form a panel to select the 37 artists who will reside in the building.

Besides meeting the income qualification, artists will be considered primarily on the basis of their commitment to the arts and their community-mindedness.

In addition to the artist residences, Mr. Kander said the building's first floor will be dedicated to providing a space for six to 10 minority-owned businesses.

Local Braddock artist Taylor Faith-Leeper said it's important that those who invest in the town "can't just be a name on a piece of paper."

"If you're getting the heart without the love, what is there?" Ms. Faith-Leeper said. So when Mr. Kander reached out to her for help with the project, she obliged.

The future of Braddock is important to Ms. Faith-Leeper, as she has deep ties within the community. Her grandmother, Lena Thelma Franklin, worked in the Ohringer building as a job developer and even opened a thrift store of her own called Haven in the blue building across the street.

Not only is she here to honor her family's historical ties to the area but also to nurture the future generations.

Ms. Faith-Leeper said she hopes this project will help provide community spaces for kids to find good outlets to express themselves without resorting to crime or violence.

Braddock Council President Tina Doose said she checked to make sure Mr. Kander had all the right intentions before any decisions were made to make sure he has the funding and the drive to "get the job done" on this project.

Ms. Doose, said Mr. Kandor, has been "a true partner" in helping Braddock transform.

"The Ohringer building is central to Braddock's 21st-century renaissance," Ms. Doose said.

Ms. Doose also commended County Executive Rich Fitzgerald after he helped fill the gap caused by tax cuts passed by Republicans in 2017.

Mr. Fitzgerald said bringing this project to life draws similarities to the success of the Mattress Factory on the North Side. By bringing 37 artists to the area, Mr. Fitzgerald said he believes there will be an "injection of energy" in Braddock.

"This community is on its way back. It's coming back, and it's coming back strong," Mr. Fitzgerald said.

Ms. Faith-Leeper said living in Braddock feels like a big family reunion, which is why it's special.

"When you're in New York you feel like a drip in the ocean," she said. "When you're here they know you, they know your family. I haven't seen that in many other places."

Lauren Lee: llee@post-gazette.