

Opinion



John Somers, owner of Harmac Medical Products, has shown deep concern for the Bailey Avenue neighborhood around his company. (Derek Gee/Buffalo News)

Owner of Bailey Avenue business makes it his mission to rebuild an entire neighborhood

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A shining example of how corporate and civic responsibility can help mend an entire neighborhood is on full display in a seven-block area along Bailey Avenue. In last Sunday's Buffalo News, [reporter Mark Sommer](http://www.buffalonews.com/city-region/east-side/at-bailey-green-an-oasis-emerges-in-neighborhood-around-harmac-medical-products-20160312) (<http://www.buffalonews.com/city-region/east-side/at-bailey-green-an-oasis-emerges-in-neighborhood-around-harmac-medical-products-20160312>) detailed the efforts of Harmac Medical Products, a second-generation manufacturing company on Bailey, to improve its surroundings.

It is a remarkable story-in-the-making that demonstrates what can be accomplished. The company and many partners are working to bring houses, apartments, a community garden, soccer pitches, greenhouses and a café to a seven-block area between Bailey and Leslie Street, extending between Genesee and Scajaquada streets.

These extraordinary plans emerged from a comprehensive strategy involving Harmac, Habitat for Humanity Buffalo, the University at Buffalo's School of Architecture and Planning, the City of Buffalo, Algonquin Sports for Kids, Urban Fruits & Veggies and others. The multifaceted project is called Bailey Green.

John Somers, owner of Harmac, is a unique individual, the kind of successful businessman who embraces his employees, understanding that he is in a position to give more, and so he does. Western New York needs to grow and retain such altruism.

The Bailey Green project will include:

- Five ranch-style homes by Habitat for Humanity Buffalo.
- Eight four-unit apartments, to be named Cynthia Gardens, on four streets, built by Heart of the City Neighborhoods, a nonprofit that builds affordable housing.

- Two greenhouses, a community garden, a fruit orchard and a café on Zenner Street by Urban Fruits & Veggies.

- Two acres of vegetable fields by Groundwork Market Garden.

- Two mini-soccer pitches.

- A carpentry training center by artist and architect Dennis Maher, along with Albright-Knox Art Gallery's Innovation Lab.

Harmac has been a mainstay at 2201 Bailey Ave. for 35 years. The company's investment on Bailey Avenue from Genesee to Scjajaquada over the past six years includes paying for trash pickup, planting 150 trees and converting more than four acres to green space after purchasing 20 blighted parcels and demolishing dilapidated houses.

The company also invests in its workers. It provides wraparound services, including free tax services and credit reports. There is also a mammogram bus and even a masseuse. And there are annual summer camp scholarships for the children and grandchildren of employees and six college scholarships that pay for up to eight semesters at a four-year school.

The company philosophy extends beyond its walls and into the community, bringing in partners to help facilitate its forward-thinking vision. That included guidance from UB's Hiroaki Hata, an associate professor of urban design, who made Bailey Green the subject of a studio project in the fall of 2014 through the UB Research Institute.

Rebuilding a neighborhood beset by decades of neglect will not occur overnight. It takes dedication and hard work. The result of that is the public-private partnership being demonstrated at Bailey Green, which shows how one company's vision can be the catalyst for reviving a community.