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John Somers, owner of Harmac Medical Products, walks down Wende Street, where his company is planning to develop empty lots in an effort to help fix up the neighborhood around the company's Bailey Avenue plant. (Derek Gee/Buffalo News)

At Bailey Green, an oasis emerges in neighborhood around Harmac Medical Products

Harmac Medical Products' stake in Bailey Green aims to change lives in community where it operates

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Pleas Starks Jr. walks a block and half to his job every workday, passing vacant lots and a boarded-up building amid the homes still standing in his East Side neighborhood.

When Starks arrives at Harmac Medical Products, he works in a safe, clean factory on a stretch of Bailey Avenue the company has nicely landscaped – and where the owner pays attention to his employees.

Owners of the second-generation manufacturer, which has stayed put in the city and employs local residents, now have decided to invest in the neighborhood as well.

The company has become the catalyst for a partnership pledging to bring new houses and apartments, a community garden, soccer pitches, greenhouses and a cafe to a neglected seven-block area between Bailey and Leslie Street, reaching between Genesee and Scajaquada streets.

“Fundamentally, it’s the right thing to do,” said John Somers, Harmac’s owner.

One of every five of the company’s 380 employees lives in the company’s 14211 ZIP code.

“I think we have a responsibility to change the lives of the people in the community in which we live,” Somers said.

So Harmac, a maker of medical devices, has teamed with Habitat for Humanity Buffalo, the University at Buffalo's School of Architecture and Planning, Algonquin Sports for Kids and Urban Fruits & Veggies among others on a multi-faceted project called Bailey Green.

If it all comes together, Starks' walk to work from his Wende Street home will remind him of an earlier time.

"It was a beautiful neighborhood back then," Starks said. "There wasn't a vacant lot on this whole street."

Starks, a 56-year-old production worker and father of 10, motioned toward empty lots across the street from his home where Habitat for Humanity Buffalo plans to break ground in April to build five houses.

"It will be helpful to revitalize this neighborhood," Starks said.

Starks called Somers "approachable and very personable" – different than other business leaders he has encountered.

"It surprised me that he would take that type of attitude about the neighborhood, because he doesn't live here," Starks said. "Most businessmen don't really care about the neighborhood."

Here's what Somers and others plan for the neighborhood:

- Five ranch-style homes by Habit for Humanity Buffalo.
- Eight four-unit apartments, to be called Cynthia Gardens, on four streets, built by Heart of the City Neighborhoods, a non-profit that builds affordable housing.
- Two greenhouses, a community garden, a fruit orchard and cafe on Zenner Street by Urban Fruits & Veggies.
- Two acres of vegetable fields by Groundwork Market Garden.
- Two mini-soccer pitches for area youngsters.
- A carpentry training center by artist and architect Dennis Maher, with Albright-Knox Art Gallery's Innovation Lab.

Lovejoy Council Member Richard Fontana called Bailey Green a difference maker for the neighborhood.

"The land is affordable, people are motivated, you have public and corporate sponsors, and all of these different entities all working together at the table with a common goal," Fontana said. "This is a collaboration to redo an area unlike anything I've seen."

Helping employees

Harmac has been at 2201 Bailey Ave., near East Ferry Street, for 35 years.

The company has maintained Bailey Avenue from Genesee to Scajaquada the past six years. Harmac pays for trash pickup, planted 150 trees, and converted over 4 acres to green space after buying 20 blighted parcels and demolishing broken-down houses.

The company had an economic incentive to do so, since it wanted the surroundings to look more appealing to out-of-town job applicants.

"Some of our senior managers thought I was smoking something when I started knocking these houses down, but it has helped," Somers said. "We have been able to attract better talent. We also have Fortune 500 companies, and they visit here."

Now Somers wants to see those kinds of improvements inside the neighborhood.

While Harmac isn't building the new homes, Somers said the company is making "a pretty reasonable donation" for each of the homes going in.

Harmac has an unusually employee-focused culture. Each month, someone comes to the company

offering employee services, everything from free tax services and credit reports to a mammogram bus and even a masseuse giving massages to relieve stress.

“You recognize that employees have many challenges, and they don’t have the time to take care of these critical needs,” said Heidi Romer.

As the company’s community advancement liaison, she has become a point person on the Bailey Green project.

Harmac gives several 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.

“My metrics are how many people participated, how many lives have we changed, and how much money employees are saving,” Romer said.

‘Tactical urbanism’

Habitat for Humanity Buffalo became the company’s first partner.

The nonprofit bought land from the city for the project. Three of the five houses will be stick-built on site, and the other two will be modular homes.

“Our goal at Habitat is to help folks achieve the American Dream of owning their own home,” said Jerry Sheldon, Habitat’s president. “I think it’s a great, great redevelopment of a part of the city that really needs the help. And it’s real. It’s not just a concept – it’s going to happen.”

Heart of the City Neighborhoods is seeking funding for Cynthia Gardens. Stephanie Simeon, the organization’s executive director, said she’s confident the eight planned apartments will be built.

Romer sought help from UB’s School of Architecture and Planning to design a plan.

Hiroaki Hata, an associate professor of urban design, made Bailey Green the subject of a studio project in the fall of 2014 through the UB Research Institute. Three student teams with urban planners and architects worked on the project.

“Our first impression was that there was an amazing deterioration in and out of this area,” Hata said. “Lots of vacancies, demolitions, houses in bad repair.”

The teams researched the neighborhood’s demographics and – with a walkable and sustainable neighborhood plan in mind – developed three plans with renderings and illustrations that were used to help come up with what has become an evolving plan.

“These are low-level investments that don’t need much capital and can be done in a year or two. It’s called tactical urbanism,” said Vivek Thanumalayan, who partnered with Jie Dai on the project as both finished their master degrees in urban planning.

The plan is a finalist in the 53rd annual International Making Cities More Livable Design Competition, being held in Rome, Italy, in June.

Last year, during a Bailey Green Community Day on Wende Street, over three dozen vendors and food trucks turned out and residents received health screenings. About 100 residents showed up. The city followed with a neighborhood Clean Sweep.

Prime Time Energy offered reduced-cost weatherization to homeowners.

As the project moves forward, Romer envisions a playground and pocket park and public art.

“In a couple of years, I want to hear screaming kids, and see people sitting on their porches and enjoying their block,” she said.

Going green

Two specially designed, weather-hardy hydroponic greenhouses planned for the neighborhood will measure 72 feet by 72 feet. The community garden will have 53 raised beds, 38 for the community’s use, and 15 to supplement the greenhouses.

“We want to make healthier food more affordable, more acceptable and more readily available,” said Mike Lee, a horticulturist for Urban Fruits & Veggies.

“We are one of the sickest counties in our state, and the lack of transportation contributes to being a food desert. We’re hoping to change that,” said Allison DeHoney, president of Urban Fruits & Veggies. “We also want to teach why it is important not to eat fast food, and to prepare the majority of your meals at home.”

The cost for the greenhouses, cafe, community garden and fruit orchard could reach \$1.7 million. DeHoney called it an economic development project.

Eighteen to 20 full- and part-time jobs would be created, and hundreds of students, from elementary to college level, would be trained how to grow, harvest and prepare food, she said.

The cafe, with an outdoor patio, would become a community gathering spot.

“It’ll be a place for people go to and hang out, because there really is nothing like that in the area,” DeHoney said.

Algonquin Sports for Kids will help Bailey Green go green in another way – with two green 100-foot-by-50-foot mini-pitches for soccer. The company operates two free, 12-week leagues called Soccer for Success in five city parks thanks to corporate sponsorships. The company also provides free shin guards, socks, a jersey and a ball at no cost.

“I think every kid deserves the opportunity to just be a kid, no matter where they live, and play is a big part of that. That’s how kids learn,” said Anna-Lesa Calvert, Algonquin Sports for Kids’ executive director. “Sports can also be a good conduit to start getting people together in a community.”

Recreation also helps reduce the high rates of childhood obesity found in Erie County.

The mini-pitches cost \$300,000, and the plan calls for them to be located on Zenner Street, between Genesee and East Ferry.

Groundbreaking is planned in spring 2017.

The city Department of Public Works has spent over \$200,000 on sidewalk improvements on Bailey Avenue, where Harmac has also invested. And the Division of Real Estate is helping Bailey Green’s partners obtain city-owned land.

Bulldozers have also torn down 75 houses in that area over the years, freeing the parcels for new uses.

“The reason we are so focused on that area is because we have a business that is going above and beyond,” said Brendan Mehaffy, who directs the city’s Office of Strategic Planning. “It is a great public-private partnership.”

‘Eyes teared up’

Mayda Pozantides and Anders Gunnensen of Groundwork Market Garden plan to put their two acres into organic vegetable production this spring, with an onsite farm stand a possibility.

“We want to focus on getting our vegetables to the people in the area, and are making connections with people established in the community,” Pozantides said.

They were surprised at first to learn that Urban Fruits & Veggies planned to come to the neighborhood.

“We didn’t think anyone else was going to consider it a great area for farming. We thought we were kind of crazy,” Pozantides said. “But it’s certainly an area that needs food. There are plenty of mouths to feed. Ultimately, it’s a good thing to have in our community.”

Pozantides said the soil was tested for heavy metals and other concerns, and the results met EPA standards. They’ve already worked the ground by adding tons of manure and compost, and planted cover crops to remediate the soil.

She found the people in the neighborhood supportive.

“One woman was so overwhelmed that her eyes teared up,” Pozantides said. “She said it was so nice to see something like this going on in the neighborhood.”

For Romer, it’s one more indication of the possibilities for an area that was once an intact neighborhood, and could be so again some day soon.

“To me, it is like a blank canvas,” Romer said. “When I walk these streets, I see opportunity. I see what can be.”

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