

# A village greets its tenants

By Robert Preer, Globe Correspondent | June 18, 2009

One of the first mixed-use developments south of Boston will reach a milestone shortly: On July 1, Chestnut Green, a residential-retail-office complex in Foxborough, is slated to welcome its first apartment tenants to a renovated 19th-century hospital building.

The recession has slowed but not stalled the project at the site of the long vacant Foxborough State Hospital.

"We've been lucky," said Vincent O'Neill, president of VinCo Properties of Boston, a codeveloper of the 92-acre site. "We were able to get financing and finish the retail last year. Another month, and who knows what would have happened?"

Other big mixed-use projects planned in the region have not fared so well. Major construction has not yet started at Westwood Station, Sharon Commons, Lakeville State Hospital, Quincy Shipyard, and SouthField at the former South Weymouth Naval Air Station. Hingham Shipyard is being built, but the developers there, like those at Chestnut Green, have pushed back some scheduled construction. At first glance, Chestnut Green, less than a mile from downtown Foxborough, still resembles the historic state hospital that operated on the site for many years. Stately Gothic brick buildings are set back from the road, surrounded by large expanses of grass and tall trees.

Looked at differently, though, Chestnut Green could be a new Foxborough downtown. The old buildings are being turned into apartments and offices. On the periphery is a cluster of stores, restaurants, and a pub, as well as single-family homes, playing fields, and a police and fire station.

"It's a village," said Matthew Abrams, president of codeveloper Abrams Properties of Brookline. "It is master-planned. There's a supermarket you can walk to, a drug store, and a Dunkin' Donuts."

The retail and offices opened last year, and about 22 single-family homes are occupied.

The retail space, anchored by a Walgreen's drug store, is fully occupied, but offices are only about 50 percent leased. The main office tenants are Industrial Defender, an Internet security firm, and Caritas Norwood, which has a small suite of medical offices.

Single-family home construction also has slowed at the site. There are 32 now finished, and with sales slow, the developers are renting some of them. Among the tenants are members of the New England Patriots who, given the instability of NFL careers, would rather rent than buy.

When complete, Chestnut Green, located near the junction of Chestnut, North, and Main streets, is to consist of 55 apartments, 73 single-family homes, 50 townhouse condominiums, and 15 attached condominiums, as well as 55,000 square feet of retail and 100,000 square feet of offices.

Abrams Properties and VinCo Properties bought the former hospital, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, at a 2005 state auction for \$5.2 million.

"We consider this a great success story," said Peter Norstrand, deputy commissioner of the state Division of Capital Asset Management, the agency overseeing state hospital redevelopment. "The developers were able to preserve a large part of the buildings on the property."

As part of the transfer, the town of Foxborough received land on the site for a new public safety building, as well as playing fields and playgrounds. The public safety building opened last year.

Local developers Douglas A. King Builders Inc. of North Easton and Intoccia Construction Co. of Foxborough are building the single-family homes and townhouse condos on the site.

Tax revenue from Chestnut Green and the larger Patriot Place shopping center next to Gillette Stadium has boosted the town's finances, according to officials.

"It's made the town somewhat immune from the fiscal problems other towns have had," said state Representative F. Jay Barrows, a Mansfield Republican and former president of the Tri-Town Chamber of Commerce in Mansfield, Foxborough, and Norton.

Foxborough State Hospital opened in 1889 to treat alcoholics and later housed people with psychiatric disorders. It closed as a mental institution in 1976. Various state agencies used parts of the property until 1993, when the state declared it surplus.

The one- or two-bedroom apartments at Chestnut Green are being offered at \$1,150 to \$2,900 a month. Single-family home prices start in the \$500,000 range and go up to \$850,000 or higher, according to O'Neill. He said that the townhouse condos, which have not started construction, will be priced around \$429,000.

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