

SINA's latest rehab projects are building on years of resident-driven efforts to fight blight, increase home ownership in Hartford

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Hartford homeowner Andrea Richardson wears a hard hat and wields a hammer during a photo opp outside a blighted, abandoned property on her street in Frog Hollow. The three-story apartment building at 41 Madison St. is being redeveloped by SINA after sitting vacant for years, at times used by drug dealers and squatters. (Rebecca Lurye)

HARTFORD — Four vacant, blighted properties in Hartford's Frog Hollow neighborhood will soon provide new opportunities for first-time homeowners as part of a yearlong campaign by SINA and city residents to transform the neighborhood.

The historic homes on Madison and Squire streets are undergoing renovations by the Southside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance, a partnership between Connecticut Children's, Hartford

Hospital and Trinity College that has redeveloped 83 buildings for new homebuyers in recent years.

The latest rehabs are the seventh phase of SINA's Cityscape project, which has taken numerous sore spots throughout south central Hartford — the boarded-up, tax-delinquent homes that often attract criminal activity — and made them into new sources of generational wealth for the low- and moderate-income families who purchase them. Replacing absentee owners with owner-occupied rentals also helps counteract the concentration of poverty in inner city neighborhoods.

Melvyn Colon, executive director of SINA, said the effort in Frog Hollow has worked because it didn't start with heady theories about community development and wealth building. It started with neighborhood residents like Andrea Richardson.

“It started with a conversation — ‘What are your concerns?’” Colon said during a news conference Tuesday. “And the concerns were particularly acute and dealt with the safety of neighbors.”

Richardson, 51, has been waiting for years to something positive done with the two vacant properties across from her Madison Street house.

She and her husband bought their own property from SINA about 15 years ago, thinking they'd found a safe place to raise their children in the redeveloped Cityscape house just around the corner from Connecticut Children's and Hartford Hospital.

After just a few years, Richardson was disappointed to find not every property owner was as invested in the neighborhood as she was. Across from her home, an abandoned, three-family apartment building was attracting squatters, drug dealers and prostitutes.



The three-story apartment building at 41 Madison St., in Hartford, is being redeveloped by SINA to be sold to a first-time home buyer. The boarded-up property, which attracted squatters and drug dealers, previously had an absentee owner, SINA said. (Rebecca Lurye)

She would often see people using drugs outside the house, and once confronted a half-dressed woman stumbling on her lawn.

After she got a flier from SINA on her door one summer day in 2015, she started attending its weekly meetings. She and her husband loved their house, which had fulfilled their dream of homeownership after years spent renting apartments in the Bronx and then in Hartford, where Richardson's mother lived.

Richardson, who was born in Jamaica, said she remembers thinking, "I'm not selling, cause I know the neighborhood's gonna turn around and I want it to turn around for people who look like me, cause they deserve to live decent."

That summer, SINA helped area residents form Safety Alliance for Everyone (SAFE), a neighborhood safety and cleanliness coalition that aimed to make south central Hartford more attractive to families, workers and students and less attractive to trouble makers.

Things got better across the street, too. One day that July, a police van pulled up to 41 Madison St. Officers pulled multiple people from the illegal boardinghouse, along with guns, drugs and surveillance cameras.

After that raid, the property sat vacant for three more years until SINA bought it at a bank auction. Melvyn Colon, executive director of SINA, said he had to outbid the same absentee owner who lost the property in a foreclosure.

With \$1.1 million from the state Department of Housing and an \$800,000 construction loan from the Local Initiative Support Corporation, SINA is now redeveloping that apartment building, a vacant home at 38 Madison St. and a duplex at 45-47 Squire St.

“Yeah, it didn’t happen overnight, it took several years, but anything worth doing well takes time,” said Richardson, who now works for Connecticut Children’s as a medical education administrator.

In recent years, SINA has also improved several vacant properties with murals, a playground with equipment made from old tires, and a community garden.

“Blight can be a cancer in a community, but removing blight can restore confidence, can spur investment, and can transform a community block by block, home by home,” Mayor Luke Bronin said during a news conference Tuesday.

To this day, SAFE holds several cleanups a year throughout Frog Hollow.

Groups representing local churches, community outreach groups and Hartford’s police and fire departments compete to bag the most trash and flag the most safety issues — like potholes, sidewalk problems and bulky waste — for the city by submitting reports to 311, the city’s nonemergency service center.

The young people always win, Richardson said with a laugh. They’re the best with the 311 app and the most organized, she says, even thinking to send one person ahead of the cleanup crew to take and upload all the pictures.

“They’re fast. I don’t think we’ll ever beat them,” Richardson said.

But even better than the sense of community she’s gained from SAFE — the post-cleanup pizza parties and networking with local groups — is the change she’s noticed around her. The streets that are messiest one year are often much cleaner the next because the residents have picked up where SAFE left off.

“It was such a joy to go to streets that in the beginning we had so much work to do, but each time we go back it’s less and less work because now people are getting the message: take care of where you live. Even if you’re renting, it’s still where you lay your head,” Richardson said.

Leaders of Connecticut Children’s, Hartford Hospital and Trinity said investments in safe, decent housing and battling blight are necessary to improve the environment they share.

“It’s remarkable that our three institutions have banded together in such a strong partnership to improve the quality of life in this community,” said Hartford Hospital President Bimal Patel. “That includes the health, safety and economic vitality of the neighborhood, its residents and students, and the well-being of our employees, patients and visitors.”

Construction should take about six months.

Dean Iaiennaro, SINA’s director of real estate development, says it won’t take nearly that long to find buyers. He started getting calls as soon as SINA put signs on the properties Monday announcing the project.

Richardson said she can’t wait to meet her new neighbors.

“I’m going to make them know they’re welcome; not like when I moved here, no one came and said ‘Hi,’ nothing,” Richardson said. “I’m going to make them welcome and want to care.”

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Link taken on 9/7/2021: <https://www.courant.com/community/hartford/hc-news-hartford-sina-homeowner-opportunities-20210903-eiga2bcbpnd2pmpc4jry2zlode-story.html>