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Learn the housing lessons of Matinecock Court



The Matinecock Court housing project is coming up on a 15-acre plot at the corner of Elwood and Pulaski Roads in East Northport. Credit: Newsday/Randi F. Marshall



By Randi F. Marshall

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Updated July 12, 2023 4:11 pm

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Developer Peter Florey was grinding down metal in a part-time job at a Connecticut submarine factory while attending college.

Housing Help Inc. Executive Director Pilar Moya was in fourth grade at a Catholic school in Peru.

New York Homes & Community Renewal Commissioner RuthAnne Visnauskas was four years old, living in New Britain, Connecticut.

In 1978, Florey, Moya and Visnauskas knew nothing about a newly proposed affordable housing project on the corner of Elwood and Pulaski roads in East Northport. But over time, each helped move Matinecock Court past seemingly insurmountable obstacles to what it is now.

See the momentous mounds of dirt. Hear the sweet sound of construction machinery. Witness the first of 17 two-story residential buildings taking shape.

The “end of the beginning,” as Moya called it.

As Florey and Moya surveyed the land this week, recalling the battles they fought, you could almost see the 146 units; the clubhouse, playgrounds and parking; and the street called Matinecock Court — all rising out of decades of ugly, often racist opposition.

“There’s been this epic struggle for so long to get it done,” Florey said. “Now we finally brought it across the finish line.”

The project’s troubled history includes a legal fight that went to the U.S. Supreme Court, which upheld previous rulings that Huntington Town had violated the Fair Housing Act by limiting such housing to “urban renewal” areas like Huntington Station. In the years that followed, every few steps forward were met with another step back.

Others might have given up. But those supporting Matinecock — thankfully — never did.

“The inability to build Matinecock would have been a signal to other communities and other local governments that if you wait people out long enough, you could beat them,” said former Long Island Builders Institute head Mitch Pally, a steadfast Matinecock ally. “And that wasn’t something we would allow to happen.”

Matinecock is now a limited equity cooperative. Residents will pay a monthly fee, starting at \$1,206 a month, and build equity without down payments or closing costs. Aimed at those earning as little as \$53,900, the project is a welcome change for Long Island, where “affordable” isn’t often truly affordable.

Visnauskas, whose agency helped shepherd \$87.8 million in loans, bonds and tax credits critical to the project, said Matinecock’s tortured past and bright future illustrate the bad and good of the region’s housing struggles.

“This is the extreme example of a community unwilling to get more housing but there are a lot of examples like that,” she said. “But it’s also a celebration of a community, and the advocates and

the developers that fought for so long to get what they needed.”

Now, Housing Help is looking for its next affordable housing opportunity — one, Moya promised, that won’t take 45 years. But that doesn’t mean it’ll be easy.

Years from now, Matinecock Court will be just another street in just another East Northport neighborhood, a sought-after community. No one will be fighting it any longer. Instead, they’ll move on — to another battle over another project, quick to forget the lessons they should have learned.

“The next time a project is recommended some place and the opposition comes out again with the same issues that emerged against Matinecock and others, what will happen?” Pally said. “One hundred and forty-six families will now have a place to live. Is that a guarantee that the next 146 families will have a place to live? No.”

Columnist Randi F. Marshall's opinions are her own.



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