

30-year	15-year
6.74%	6.37%

Points and fees may apply
SOURCE: Freddie Mac

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A road doesn't run through it

Olmsted Green developers plan to limit lawns and other subdivision icons to preserve wildflowers, trees, and wetlands

By Lynn Asinof
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

To add basements to the townhouses and condominiums being planned for Olmsted Green, builders would have to remove tons of perfectly good dirt that, left undisturbed, will help preserve natural drainage at this wild, even overgrown site where three Boston neighborhoods meet.

But the developers — the nonprofit Lena Park Community Development Corp. and the real estate firm New Boston Fund — are striving to minimize the environmental effects that come from plunking down more than 500 housing units on 42 acres of fields, woods, and wetlands on the grounds of the old Boston State Hospital.

So, no basements. Buildings will instead have ground-level storage areas. Lawns will be kept to a minimum to limit mowing and watering. Taking their place will be "rain gardens," designed to hold storm water runoff and landscaped with plants such as day lilies that thrive in both wet and dry conditions. Moreover, stands of mature trees, sometimes leveled in suburban subdivisions, will remain a fixture on the landscape. And swaths of wildflowers will continue to bloom since developers choose not

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Taking the place of lawns in rendering (above) of Olmsted Green will be 'rain gardens' and plants designed to thrive in both wet and dry conditions.



PHOTOS BY JODI HILTON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE



Swaths of wildflowers will continue to bloom at the 42-acre project since developers have decided against building a road alongside a wetland, which serves as a wildlife habitat. At left, Bruce Fulford, of environmental firm City Soil and Greenhouse collects samples.

Developers keeping the 'green' in Olmsted project

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to build a road that was in the original plans alongside a wetland, which serves as a wildlife habitat.

So-called "green building" technology is riding a big wave in the housing community right now, in which new units have energy efficient appliances and windows, are tightly insulated, and use building materials from recycled or renewable resources.

But the Olmsted Green developers, operating under the name Lena New Boston, are trying to keep the property as green as they found it — by not knocking down or paving over the natural landscape.

"Rather than simply taxing the infrastructure of the city, we're starting with the premise that that is unacceptable," said Kirk A. Sykes, the president of the Urban Strategy America Fund, a unit of the New Boston Fund that is financing the project.

Olmsted Green is situated at the southeastern end of Frederick Law Olmsted's Emerald Necklace, just across the street from Boston's Franklin Park.

The old hospital was shuttered more than 25 years ago, and in the intervening period, the grounds have reverted to a dense patch of nature in an otherwise built-up neighborhood that borders Jamaica Plain, Dorchester, and Mattapan.

Indeed, its condition is such that the Massachusetts Audubon Society located its Boston Nature Center and Wildlife Sanctuary here, on 67 acres next to the Olmsted Green site.

Moreover, residents in the homes surrounding the property have grown accustomed to having this wild land in their midst.

"The community was certainly very vocal about retaining some of the natural beauty of this site," said Beverley Johnson, consultant to the Boston State Hospital Citizens Advisory Committee.

The challenge for developers was designing something that "was not quite city and not quite suburb," said Steven A. Heikin of ICON Architecture Inc., master planners and architects for the



PHOTOS BY JODI HILTON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

City Soil and Greenhouse's Bruce Fulford collects samples from the future site of the Olmsted Green development.

residential development. Olmsted's son addressed a similar challenge 100 years ago, when he designed Forest Hills Gardens, in Queens, N.Y., that bordered 535 acres of public parkland, says Heikin, who looked to that project for inspiration.

From the beginning Lena New Boston applied an ecological eye to everything from the grading of the property to the preservation of

old trees and even the amount of lawn that is planted.

"At a lot of condominium developments, you see acres of lawn that no one ever sets foot on," said Ed Connelly, the president of Cambridge-based New Ecology Inc., an environmental consultant to Lena New Boston. Such lawns demand regular watering and mowing, and thus consume important natural resources, he said.



Morton Street sign marks the development on the grounds of the old Boston State Hospital.

Hence the rain gardens, which collect storm water so that it can slowly percolate into the ground rather than letting it rapidly runoff into an already taxed city sewer system.

"The biggest challenge is as more and more land gets developed, it becomes more critical to develop new methods of dealing with storm water" runoff, said Bruce Fulford, the president of City Soil and Greenhouse Co., an environmental firm also working on the project.

And rather than being viewed as a nuisance, the property's natural wetlands are being treated as an asset. Left in place, they will serve as a focal point, showcasing some spectacular swamp white oaks identified two years ago when a professional arborist walked the property.

Trees, which also help with storm water control and soil erosion and provide beauty as well, received special attention in the early planning stages.

"The idea was to identify those trees that had outstanding at-

tributes and were worth saving," said Peter Del Tredici, senior research scientist at the nearby Arnold Arboretum and the arborist who surveyed the trees.

"Parks and municipalities will do this, but developers usually want to squeeze in as much as possible," he said, and so take down trees to open up more space for housing.

In addition to the swamp white oaks, Del Tredici found "beautiful pin oaks" and some mature sugar maples that he tagged for preservation.

As for paved surfaces, the developers first limited the amount they would have, and what pavement there is will be of permeable materials to again allow water to drain into the ground instead of sewers.

Green building can be a bit more expensive than traditional construction. A national study of 16 green affordable housing projects by consultant New Ecology, for example, shows that green development on average added 2.42 percent to construction costs.

The increase is due largely to use of more expensive materials such as improved insulation and energy efficient appliances.

But the way Sykes sees it, preservation of the environment is part of the Olmsted Green marketing allure. "It is not costing us any more to build for the market that we are choosing to attract," he said. The Olmsted Green units priced from the high \$200,000s to the mid-\$400,000s will be completed over the next three to five years. The project will have 287 town homes and condos, 153 affordable housing rentals and 83 units of senior housing.

And Olmsted Green expects to continue to be involved in environmental matters after the project is completed; there's talk of offering area residents environmental education in collaboration with the Boston Nature Center.

After all, when it comes to teaching people how to become stewards of the environment, nature center director Julie Brandlen said the best place to start is "in your own backyard."