



HOMES FOR FAMILIES PRICED OUT OF UPTOWN

OPTIMIST PARK CONDOS START AT \$110,000

A \$6 million condominium project planned near uptown will target a different group of buyers from the empty nesters and young professionals driving the high-rise craze.

Duncan Gardens, a 43-unit, six-building development in Optimist Park, expects to attract middle-income singles, young couples and small families - buyers typically priced out of the torrid center city market.

Condos ranging from 800 to 1,181 square feet will sell for \$110,000 to \$132,000. The city will provide financial assistance of up to \$20,689 for eligible buyers.

"The city money will reduce the cost of these homes dollar-for-dollar, opening up ownership to so many people," said Ray "Rip" Farris, one of three partners in the development.

He said one of the developers' goals was to build housing that would be affordable to working-class families living in the resurgent neighborhood.

Optimist Park and the nearby Belmont neighborhood, northeast of uptown between the Brookshire Freeway and NoDa, are part of a major preservation and restoration push.

Duncan Gardens - bounded by 15th Street, 16th Street, Caldwell Street and Parkwood Avenue - already is a rejuvenation focal point. Farris' Tuscan Development is developing 12 condos in Opt 12, directly across Caldwell.

City leaders believe mixing new residential construction with existing houses will help fuel a comeback in Optimist Park, whose leaders have been working - with public and private assistance - to reduce crime and eliminate blight.

The neighborhood's efforts captured the attention earlier of Advantage Carolina, formed in the late 1990s by business and civic leaders to strengthen the economy and improve the region's quality of life.

A study conducted for the organization saw potential in Optimist Park and Belmont for up to \$900 million in investment, including 5,000 homes, 450,000 square feet of offices and shops, a greenway and a lake.

Farris, a partner in Duncan Gardens with Frank Martin of Landcraft Properties and Ron Leeper of R.J. Leeper Co., worked with Charlotte's Neighborhood Development Department to secure aid for qualified buyers.

Jeff Meadows, the city's housing development supervisor, said two programs are involved: One helps potential home owners with down payments on a first-come, first-served basis. The other offers developers an incentive to build in targeted revitalization areas.

A family of four earning less than \$38,460 annually would qualify for the maximum \$10,600 through one program and a \$10,000 forgivable loan from the other - if the buyer lives in the house for at least 10 years.

Meadows said Duncan Gardens will help the city fulfill its mis-

sion of providing housing for working people. "The City Council has a goal of 1,000 (units) per year, and we have met that for the past four years running," he said.

Developers plan to start construction in May. The project will include 24 condo flats and 19 townhouse-style units on about 1.5 acres of cleared land.

The site is five blocks north of First Ward's Garden District and within walking distance of a future light-rail stop on 16th Street.

The first building - to be finished in November - will be Rosa Place, four one-bedroom, one-bath townhouses on Caldwell beside an existing house.

Camellia Place, to be completed in December, consists of two three-story buildings facing 15th. Half the 24 flats will be one-bedroom, one-bath, and half will be two-bedroom, two-bath. Front units on the second and third floors will have skyline views from balconies.

Three two-story buildings in Azalea Place - targeted for completion in January - each will have five townhouses with two bedrooms and 2 1/2 baths. Two buildings will have Parkwood addresses and the third will have a 16th Street address.

Kitchens in Duncan Gardens (www.duncangardens.com) will open into great rooms and include ranges, dishwashers and clothes washers and dryers.

The Wilson Group designed the project and Carocon Corp. will construct it. First Charlotte Properties is handling sales.

The project's name comes from Duncan Gardens' proximity to Duncan Memorial United Methodist Church across 15th and the McGill Rose Garden, three blocks to the south on Davidson Street.

The developers - familiar names in Charlotte - have been involved in Optimist Park's revitalization efforts.

As a City Council member in the 1970s and 1980s, Leeper, now a construction company owner, helped establish codes to assure that absentee owners provide safe and sanitary housing in such neighborhoods.

He, Martin, president of residential developer Landcraft Properties, and Farris, a principal in Tuscan Development, consulted with community leaders on integrating homes into the neighborhood and helped last summer with a community cleanup.

Farris also is treasurer of the Optimist Park Neighborhood Association and is Advantage Carolina's "champion" in promoting revitalization there.

Said Martin: "There are historic things to honor here. And we're sensitive to the fact that we want to be welcomed by people who live here rather than force change on them."