

Five new homes dedicated in Oliver

First dwellings built there in half-century

By Stephen Kiehl | Sun reporter
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Standing in front of five new homes in Oliver, Mayor Sheila Dixon joins in a dedication ceremony. Behind her are Gov. Martin O'Malley and U.S. Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski. The homes, the first built in the East Baltimore neighborhood in about 50 years, are near Johns Hopkins Hospital. (Sun photo by Andre F. Chung / July 28, 2008)

The first new homes to be built in a half-century in East Baltimore's Oliver neighborhood were dedicated yesterday, a sign of progress, officials said, in a blighted swath of the city once notorious for drug dealing.

As a result of a unique public-private partnership, vacant houses were demolished and land was assembled to build 75 homes for low- to moderate-income homebuyers. Another 47 homes will be rehabilitated, all within a six-square-block area just north of [Johns Hopkins Hospital](#).

The first five of the new homes, on Caroline Street, were completed this month. [Gov. Martin O'Malley](#), [Mayor Sheila Dixon](#) and U.S. Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski joined the homeowners for a ribbon-cutting ceremony yesterday.

The handsome three-story homes with red-brick fronts stand in sharp contrast to the blocks filled with boarded-up homes nearby. One survey put Oliver's vacancy rate at 44 percent.

But the community was galvanized after seven members of the Dawson family were killed in a 2002 fire set by drug dealers they had been battling. Churches in Oliver, organized by the social action group Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development, raised \$1.2 million to rebuild their community. Residents turned out in force yesterday, crowding the street for the ribbon-cutting and then swarming into the new homes.

"The Oliver community is so spunky, so feisty," Mikulski said. "They have pushed out the drug dealers. They have fought blight and they have fought despair."

The new homes will be priced around \$139,000 for families making 80 percent or less of the area median income (to \$54,000 for a family of four). Families making more money can buy the homes but would have to pay market rate because they would not qualify for a state subsidy.

The rehabilitated homes will sell for \$99,000 with the subsidy.

In the next three years, all 122 homes should be completed. "I can see the Oliver community transforming into a neighborhood that we can be proud of, that we can respect," Dixon said.

To make the project happen, the city kicked in \$3 million and the state \$10 million. The Jewish Fund for Justice matched the \$1.2 million raised by the Oliver churches. And Anthony W. Deering, former chairman of the Rouse Co., led the effort to raise \$10 million from investors for rebuilding blighted neighborhoods across East Baltimore. The Oliver homes are the first to be improved through that fund.

Some of the new homeowners got into their houses for the first time yesterday. They delighted in the size of the structures, and they said they were dedicated to rebuilding the community.

"I've seen it through good and bad," said Felicia McKoy, 34, a case manager with Baltimore's Healthy Start program and a new homeowner. She said Oliver is entering a period of renewal, just as she is. "This is the opening of a new season in my life," said McKoy, who is pregnant, standing in a room that she says will be the nursery in her home.

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