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Borland Green Ecovillage: a grand plan for co-housing in East Liberty

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By Diana Nelson Jones, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Bob Donaldson/Post-Gazette

Emily and Sten Carlson on Thursday work on refurbishing the rowhouse they have purchased on Black Street in East Liberty.

Seven brown-brick rowhouses on Black Street behind Peabody High School had been in the process of falling apart when East Liberty Development Inc. bought them out of foreclosure last year.

Since then, the agency has assembled eight more residences on the blocks within Borland, Black and Beatty streets as part of a bigger plan.

"Our goal is to help Borland Green reach their vision," said Kendall Pelling, ELDI's real estate project manager.

The Borland Green Ecovillage is a co-housing group of 10 households, most of which have dibs on properties in the row or nearby. A co-housing community is an assembly of residents who share a lifestyle vision.

The community started ahead of renovations by establishing a garden on a large tract that was remediated by three years of sunflower and canola planted by the non-profit GTECH. The 18,000-square-foot garden lot will be developed to include an orchard and other edible plants. East Liberty Development still owns that land and is working with the city to get title for two more parcels.

Maureen Copeland, GTECH's community programs manager, bought and moved into the most habitable unit in May. Pat Buddemeyer, an original instigator of Pittsburgh's co-housing movement, expects work to be done on her unit for a move from nearby Rippey Street in October.

Sten and Emily Carlson live in North Point Breeze as they renovate and restore the unit they recently bought.

For years, Ms. Buddemeyer and Maria Piantanida had been among a dozen people throughout the metropolitan area who have shared potluck dinners trying to stick together while looking for a place that was suitable or had potential to accommodate them. The group split into those who wanted to build new and this group that wanted to be in the city and reuse existing housing.

"We looked at a lot of places," said Ms. Buddemeyer.

"The thing that has pulled us all together is all the green space here," said Ms. Piantanida, who lives in Churchill and does not have a Borland Green move-in date.

She has agreed not to bug her husband anymore about moving there for the sake of their marriage, she said, "but I keep coming here and I keep saying I'm going to build a little hut" as a hermitage.

"I've lived in my neighborhood for 32 years and hardly know anybody. This is sort of where my heart is now."

Knowing your neighbors is one step ahead of the co-housing process. Bringing people together to be neighbors on purpose is the essence. Then it goes deeper.

"Sharing resources so you don't need seven lawnmowers, just one," said Sten Carlson.

"Having someone look out for your house while you're out of town," added Ms. Piantanida.

Another advantage, she said, is that elders have support while they pool their resources to get care at home instead of having to go to a nursing home.

These are the staples of what makes co-housing attractive to a growing number of people.

Diana Leafe Christian, a national expert on co-housing, said at least 116 communities are established across the country and roughly another 150 are in the stages of finding and purchasing land.

The East Liberty group paid less than \$20,000 a unit for the seven townhouses on Black Street. When the slumlord owner's portfolio blew up, Mr. Pelling said the group approached ESB Bank "to work with us so the properties would transfer well. They foreclosed and sold them to us and gave us a loan and financing for purchase and renovation."

Of two tenants who lived there before, he said, "we're working with them to help them buy their units. Now they have a great community around them."

Besides those seven, the agency has a single-family house and five of six townhouses under agreement on Borland and two townhouses on Beatty. The prices of the homes range from \$50,000 to \$70,000.

The agency is prepared to rent or sell, and renters can "test-drive the community," Mr. Pelling said.

"This is an affordable community that does not create barriers. Someone with a Section 8 voucher who is interested in this kind of lifestyle could be part of it."

The Community Design Center of Pittsburgh granted \$4,000 for a landscape architect. The Sprout Fund contributed \$5,000 to reward Borland Green's species biodiversity plan.

The Borland Green grant "is one of the more compelling small investments we have made," said Mac Howison, Sprout's funding programs manager, "and its happening quickly. It's a success story."

A portion of a \$20,000 grant from the Heinz Endowments will pay for a cistern and rain garden.

The group also has sought the help of the Green Building Alliance on doing the most energy efficient renovations.

On Black Street, a scaffold sits in front of one home while the sound of hammers and drills around back can be heard from the street. Each unit has a porch in front and a shared area behind, where scruffy weeds pass for a lawn and rubble and construction debris are scattered about.

But already there's a red picnic table awaiting the group's first cook-out.

See a [YouTube video on Borland Green](#) produced by Transition Pittsburgh.



Bob Donaldson/Post-Gazette

Seeing green: Patt Buddemeyer, Mo Copeland and Maria Piantanida on Black Street, part of the Borland Green Ecovillage.