

A NEW BEGINNING FOR A TROUBLED APARTMENT COMPLEX / FUELED BY A SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY TO HIS ADOPTED COUNTRY, VIETNAMESE DEVELOPER REFURBISHES BUILDING

The News Tribune - Tacoma, Wash.

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Date: Mar 22, 1997
Start Page: B.1
Section: Local/State
Text Word Count: 894

Document Text

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Not so long ago, many people in Lacey thought the Brandonwood Apartments were a lost cause. The city last spring had to order the dilapidated six-building complex on the 2500 block of Ruddell Road Southeast vacated for health and safety reasons, said City Manager Greg Cuoio. The Housing Authority of Thurston County tried to buy the apartments but decided the project couldn't pencil out financially.

Lacey developer Tri Vo saw it as an opportunity.

Now called Victorian Place, the complex with neatly painted, clean units, new appliances, linoleum, woodwork and doors is a far cry from the units of just nine months ago, Vo said.

He will celebrate the complex's grand opening at 3 p.m. today, with Chinese food, tours and a sense of satisfaction that only comes when you've completed a worthy project, Vo said.

As a new-home developer, Vo had never tackled rentals. And he still isn't sure whether he'll end up losing money on the \$1 million project, he said with a nervous laugh. While he had to raise rents, the apartments are still designed to attract low-to-middle-income renters.

Vo knew refurbishing Brandonwood Apartments wouldn't be an opportunity to make a lot of money, which he admits is usually the goal of development. Rather, it would be a chance to help both the tenants, some of whom were from his native Vietnam, and the community, part of the country that gave him a home during a time of desperate need.

"Tri bought it more as a community service than anything else," Cuoio said. "He essentially brought a slum area back to the place where it's a compliment to the community. He did a wonderful job."

Vo, president of Tri Way Enterprises land development firm, has become something of a local hero, winning praise for the renovation from City Council members, neighbors, the police department and tenants of the buildings.

City Manager Greg Cuoio said when the city ordered the apartments vacated, the units had leaking roofs and plumbing, falling ceilings, cockroaches and moldy walls. He said the city found homes for displaced tenants.

Lacey police were far too familiar with Brandonwood Apartments, as well, said officer Dave Campbell. While police weren't keeping statistics on crime calls when Brandonwood was open, Campbell said they continually responded to calls about loud parties, domestic violence, drugs, and shootings at the complex.

"It was a blight on the community," Campbell said.

After the city ordered the building vacated, Vo bought the property from the previous owner, Ed Boyle.

Boyle, who works in Seattle and lives in Federal Way, confirmed that the apartments were in a state of disarray, but he said some of the worst units were vacant.

Boyle also said he lost \$400,000 on the complex during the 11 years he owned it. He said he poured money into it but couldn't keep up with all the problems.

"We were trying to keep it under control," said Boyle, adding the building's problems were indigenous to the area. "I'm

the biggest victim of the whole damn thing."

Vo said he had to try to fix it out of respect for his adopted homeland.

"Considering where I came from," Vo said, "I couldn't let it go wasted."

After his parents lost all their property during the Vietnam War, Vo fled the country in 1979, he said. Dead set on getting to America to succeed and help his family, he escaped by foot, walking through the jungles of Cambodia. He ended up in a refugee camp in Thailand, where he wrote a letter each week to the U.S. ambassador, begging for entry to America.

"I promised not to be a burden to your country," he said. "I promised to work hard."

After 412 months, it worked. He's made America his home for 15 years.

"In my heart, I know if I have the opportunity to give something back," Vo said, "I will."

He said he couldn't have finished Victorian Place without the help of a cooperative city staff, his two project managers, Bob Okagi and Man Le, and companies like U S West Communications and TCI Cablevision, which installed new systems for free.

"The hardest part now is how to keep it from not going back to the way it was," Vo said.

That's what Marion and Thomas Rucinski are worried about. The couple, who has lived on 25th Loop directly behind the complex for 18 years, have worried that the apartments affected their property value. They're thrilled by Vo's efforts.

"I hope they can control the type of people they get in there," Marion said.

Officer Campbell thinks they will, thanks to a new city program. Victorian Place is one of 57 properties in Lacey participating in the police department's new Crime Reduction Multi-Housing Program, which trains landlords to keep their properties crime free.

Anyone with a felony record or bad credit rating, or who refuses to sign a contract not to use drugs, will be turned away from Victorian Place, where apartments and townhouses will rent from \$450 to \$585 monthly, Okagi said.

Vo hopes that new residents, some of whom lived there before, will care about the apartments for a compelling reason: because he did.

[Illustration]

COLOR PHOTO / Bruce Kellman/The News Tribune: Tri Vo, a Lacey developer, has been commended by the city for revamping the Brandonwood Apartments, which are pictured behind him.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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