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Towering ambitions for Boyle Heights



Developer Steven Fink stands by one of the 153 buildings of the Wyvernwood Garden Apartments in Boyle Heights. He is executive vice president of the complex's owner, Miami-based Fifteen Group, which plans a complete overhaul. "No one will be asked to move for any reason associated with this plan until absolutely necessary," he said. "... We are years away from beginning construction."

Condos, rentals and retail, with some high-rises, are planned for the sprawling site of the 1930s Wyvernwood apartments.

**By Roger Vincent
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In the Depression-era Wyvernwood Garden Apartments in the heart of East Los Angeles, the electricity often goes off if you try to run a toaster and a coffeepot at the same time. No cable TV, no high-speed Internet, no air conditioning.

The orange stucco buildings in Boyle Heights, home to about 6,000 residents, are showing their age. The neighborhood has been troubled by crime and gang activity for more than a decade. And what was once "America's largest privately owned community of rental homes" is ready for another giant step.

Thursday the residents got word about dramatic changes ahead, as urban redevelopment -

- already remaking Hollywood, Echo Park and downtown -- appears ready to leap across the Los Angeles River. And with it comes excitement and angst about how gentrification will change the old neighborhood.

The Miami investment firm that has owned Wyvernwood since 1998 announced plans for a \$2-billion redevelopment that would nearly quadruple its size by 2020. By then, all 1,187 existing units would be replaced with 4,400 environmentally sensitive condominiums and apartments, plus retail space.

If finished as planned, the complex would include some 24-story high-rises and rival in scope Park La Brea in the Fairfax district of Los Angeles, one of the largest housing projects in the West. Wyvernwood would have more than 20,000 residents served by new stores and offices.

Owners said they hoped to be leaders in a revival of Boyle Heights that would bring large-scale residential and commercial investment to some of the city's oldest districts. Developers are jockeying to buy another neighborhood landmark, the historic Sears tower and warehouse on Olympic Boulevard, a few blocks away.

"It's an exciting time for Boyle Heights," said City Councilman Jose Huizar, who has lived in the Latino neighborhood most of his life. He supports plans for Wyvernwood but also put the owners on notice that the tenants must be a priority.

He vowed that the city approval process would include substantial public comment.

"I want to ensure that existing tenants have the first opportunity to live in new homes and that tenants are treated with respect and taken care of," he said.

The developer's executive vice president, Steven Fink, sought to put tenants at ease in a low-key meeting Thursday night for about 200 residents. The development would take at least two years to get city approvals and 10 years more for the stage-by-stage transformation of Wyvernwood, he said.

"No one will be asked to move for any reason associated with this plan until absolutely necessary. . . . We are years away from beginning construction," Fink said.

Residents offered a variety of comments, including concerns about expected rent hikes, increased density and crime protection. The landlord assured tenants they would be eligible for relocation payments if forced to move.

Barbara McNeely has lived in Wyvernwood, which opened in 1939, for 60 years. When she moved in as a youngster, she recalls, the complex had mostly white residents and had a waiting list, and most tenants were college educated.

"They sent you flowers when you moved in," she said. "It was quite beautiful and a very good place to raise kids."

She said she would like to see the comeback of downtown Los Angeles spread into her neighborhood and bring more people with money to spend. Like the popular home-

improvement television show, she said, "We need an extreme makeover."

Things have changed since the 70-acre complex was hailed by the builders as "unusually practical and thoroughly comfortable and convenient." The 153 mostly two-story buildings in a park-like setting were considered the nation's largest housing development, so big the builders had to set up a sawmill there to cut enough lumber.

After World War II, the character of the neighborhood began to change; many of its more prosperous residents moved to the suburbs as "white flight" swept Southern California. By the late 1980s, Wyvernwood had a reputation as a haven for gangs

Things have generally gotten better at Wyvernwood in recent years, said Juan Flores, 76, who with his wife, Andrea, moved into the apartments 30 years ago. In the 1980s, he said, drug dealers trolled the neighborhood, drunks stumbled about and young gang members shot it out. One of his sons was assaulted once and his car was shot up one day.

But in the 1990s, security guards were hired to work at the apartments, and things improved, he said.

Today, units at Wyvernwood that range from one to three bedrooms now rent for \$1,225 to \$1,540 a month.

The new apartments would rent for substantially more, but no estimates of rents or condo prices have been given. Owner Fifteen Group Land & Development plans to make 15% of the units affordable under city guidelines based on income and family size. Existing tenants would have priority.

The owner of the Sears tower and warehouse building wants to sell it for an enormous residential and retail development. Popular Los Angeles boxer Oscar De La Hoya and Fifteen Group are among those interested.

"People totally underestimate the economy of Boyle Heights," said Mark Weinstein, owner of the Sears building.

The \$900-million Gold Line light rail under construction in the area is causing hardships for local merchants now but is expected to attract millions of dollars' worth of investment from real estate developers who want to build housing and shops around its stations.

Wyvernwood is about a mile south of the new rail line, but the developers propose adding streets to the complex that would improve connections to public transit and make it easier for police and other emergency responders to get around. Some of the streets would restore thoroughfares that were closed in the late 1930s when Wyvernwood was built.

Sister Jennie Lechtenberg, who has served in Boyle Heights for 45 years, said she was in favor "of giving people a better place to live and supporting them with things that make life convenient."

Such development could help address problems at Wyvernwood, she said.

"When people live so closely together and they don't have all the things they need, it breeds problems -- gang problems, family and economic problems."

Neighborhoods east of the Los Angeles River "have a lot of potential for infill development over time," said former city Planning Director Con Howe, who now manages a fund that provides money for low-cost housing. "It's definitely a strengthening neighborhood."

Howe said he was skeptical about whether there would be enough economic growth in the area to support high-rise condos. But developer Fink said that such towers were years away and that he expected the market to pick up in the meantime.

The word Wyvernwood has mythical origins -- a wyvern is a winged dragon in ancient lore. How the name came to East Los Angeles is unknown, but Wyvernwood was the first of a handful of "garden city" projects built in Los Angeles in the middle of the last century, said Linda Dishman of the Los Angeles Conservancy.

Other examples included Lincoln Place in Venice, which is being turned into a condominium complex. Chase Knolls in Sherman Oaks was threatened with demolition in 2000 but was declared a cultural monument by the city and continues to operate as apartments.

"These complexes have been somewhat under attack," Dishman said, but the conservancy hasn't decided whether to make an issue of Wyvernwood's historic status. "We'll wait to see the plans."

Resident Juan Flores said he was not too worried about the changes coming for the Wyvernwood. He'd like to stay, but he's philosophical about it all.

"I don't think we have the force to make the owner do otherwise," Flores said. "He's going to do what he wants. If I can stay here anyway, I'll stay."

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Times staff writer Hector Becerra contributed to this report.



The 70-acre Wyvernwood Garden Apartments complex in Boyle Heights opened in 1939. It was then considered the nation's largest housing development. Today, one- to three-bedroom units rent for \$1,225 to \$1,540 a month. Apartments in the new complex, planned for completion by 2020, would cost substantially more, though the owner plans to make 15% of the units "affordable" under city guidelines. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)



David Fuentes, 10, right, and brother Sergio, 11, play at the Wyvernwood Garden Apartments in Boyle Heights. The Fuentes family has lived at Wyvernwood for three generations. The sprawling complex was the first of a handful of "garden city" projects built in Los Angeles in the middle of the last century, according to Linda Dishman of the Los Angeles Conservancy. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

Wyvernwood Garden Apartments



Source: Times reporting

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