

Homes Part of North Memphis Revitalization

By Bill Dries

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Usually Self + Tucker Architects do the design work and planning for someone else who is the developer.

But in an open lot on the north side of Chelsea Avenue at Leath Street, seven single-family homes to come in the next year will be the architecture firm's first steps into developing.

Self + Tucker managing principal [Jimmie Tucker](#) was among those who broke ground last week in North Memphis for the Leath Street Initiative.



TUCKER

"It's not a huge leap to do development," Tucker said. "But obviously being able to buy land, develop a project and attract the financing is one of the keys."

Tucker was among those in the first class of a city of Memphis diversity development incubator that began four years ago. The incubator couples new and smaller developers with government incentives like CHDO – Community Housing Development Organization funding from the federal government specifically targeting difficult to develop areas.

The CHDO that gets the federal funding that flows through the city of Memphis for the seven homes is the [New Chicago Community Development Corp.](#)

"Many of the projects that were proposed out of the diversity development incubator were very large projects," Tucker said. "Ours was probably one of the smaller projects. It's in a great spot with Uptown just on the other side of Chelsea. It's consolidated land in an existing neighborhood."

The development north of Chelsea is another important milestone with city leaders hoping the momentum from Uptown development by Belz Enterprises and [Henry Turley Co.](#), south of Chelsea carries over into the area.

"We couldn't bring a Turley or Belz to the table. But this area looks the same with the same demographics as there," said [Eddie Hayes III](#), executive director of the [New Chicago Community Development Corp.](#) "We want them to feel like this is a place I can choose to live. It's a little slower, but we're excited because we get the same opportunity to do what they did south of Chelsea."

The Leath Street homes join the two [April Woods](#) and Bickford Square apartment developments north of Chelsea. But the goal for Leath Street is

single-family home ownership with rental as a fallback position if the real estate market remains tough.

“We’ll list them at \$69,900 and you know how the market is,” Hayes said. “We’ll do what we can. ... The city has about \$10,000 in down payment assistance for new homes. So people will be able to get a mortgage at \$59,900. It will be a payment in the mid-\$500s or low-\$500s. So we think it will be extremely affordable.”

The CHDO federal funding comes with technical assistance from the federal department of Housing and Urban Development and in many cases conditions that require affordable prices to remain intact if the property is resold.

Each of the seven homes to be built in the 900 block of Leath will have three bedrooms and two baths, an eat-in kitchen and a family room. One of the criticisms of past efforts at affordable single-family home construction is that some of the homes have had floor plans too small for modern families.

The Leath lot with an alley through part of it was wiped of old homes long enough ago that there is a worn footpath diagonally across the property. But the curb cuts and even a front curb step remain although the driveways and foundations are long gone. The lots end in a dense green line of hedges and magnolia trees that continue to run behind the houses that remain on the block.

There are lots of gaps like the one at Leath and Chelsea in the area that in the spring and summer are quickly overtaken by grass, kudzu and small trees that grow into big trees quickly. The choice of the lot wasn’t random. Hayes and city leaders say filling gaps next to existing homes gives the new homes and the older homes a better chance going forward.

“We’re going to stick with you,” Memphis Mayor A C Wharton Jr. said to those involved in the latest effort to get private capital into areas thought to be too risky without some kind of public financing to leverage private dollars. “It won’t be easy.”

Hayes passed out bumper stickers reading “Re-New Chicago” to the several dozen people who gathered for the ceremony. Some came from the front porches across the street and further down the block.

Hayes said renewal of the area “will take awhile.”

“We lose more houses to absentee landlords and blight than we could ever rebuild in one year,” he added. “Being able to replace them is huge for us.”