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EDITOR'S PICK

175-unit apartment project planned for Highland Park development

Jonathan D. Epstein

Oct 24, 2023



This rendering shows Arc Building Partners' plan for the Chalmers Apartments at Highland Park, a collaboration with BestSelf Behavioral Health. ...

Buffalo Planning Board

Jonathan D. Epstein

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Ciminelli II is picking up the mantle of the proposed Highland Park neighborhood, Skip Ad,

with a \$72 million affordable housing project.

The younger Ciminelli, through his Arc Building Partners, is collaborating with BestSelf Behavioral Health to create the Chalmers Apartments at Highland Park, bringing 175 new housing units to the vacant former retail site in a long underserved area of the city. It would include 155 apartments in a pair of larger three-story buildings, plus 20 two-story townhomes in four clusters.



The project is aimed at lower-income households and families earning as little as 30% of the area median income, with nearly half of the units reserved for those facing or experiencing homelessness, and needing extra help.

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While Arc is co-developing the project with BestSelf, it will, ultimately, be owned by the nonprofit, which will provide the supportive services. And it would be the first element of construction and development on the site at 129 Holden St. since Elim Christian Fellowship built its townhome project more than five years ago.



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A satellite view showing the location of the Chalmers Apartments at the Highland Park development.

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A rendering of the Chalmers Apartments at Highland Park townhomes, viewed from the central courtyard.

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"The project is part of the larger Highland Park Development that seeks to redevelop the former Central Park Plaza commercial property into a mixed-use, predominantly residential development," project attorney Lindsey Haubenreich of Phillips Lytle LLP wrote in the application to the Planning Board.

"The project will transform and revitalize an underutilized vacant lot and continue... to bring new life to the surrounding neighborhood, while providing much needed new multi-family affordable apartments and townhomes, as well as housing for those who seek assistance due to homelessness."

The project represents a revival of an ambitious plan to reinvigorate a 27.1-acre area of the Fillmore-Leroy neighborhood that has had a mixed history of industrial and retail uses for more than 145 years. First it was a rock quarry from 1877 to 1948, then it was filled in with clay, sand, gravel, bricks, fractured limestone, slag



and industrial fill. And then it became Central Park Plaza in 1958, hosting stores, auto repair, photo processing and dry-cleaning businesses.

By 2012, the neighborhood's retail days, centered around the Central Park Plaza, were long gone, and it was virtually abandoned. That's when Louis P. Ciminelli – owner of construction giant LPCiminelli – stepped in with partners to buy and demolish it, with a \$90 million goal to transform it into a vibrant mixed-income neighborhood. Plans called for as many as 717 new apartments, flats, townhouses and homes, plus playgrounds and parkland, as well as commercial space and neighborhood retail services.

The new owners cleared and remediated the site through the state's Brownfield Cleanup Program, built new streets and prepared for redevelopment. The city even approved two phases of new construction that would have yielded the first market-rate apartment buildings, townhomes and single-family attached homes.

But only four market-rate buildings were constructed before the plan was derailed for years after the elder Ciminelli was charged with corruption as part of a wide federal probe into the Buffalo Billion economic development program. So, except for the Elim Townhomes that were completed two years ago, the site has largely languished, until now. But Frank Ciminelli didn't want to lose the benefits of the brownfield tax credits, which will expire in 2025.



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A dusk rendering of the Chalmers Apartments at Highland Park.

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So, he's starting with one piece. According to a Sept. 5 purchase agreement, the younger Ciminelli is buying a 5.4-acre parcel from his father for \$1.1 million – including the remaining state brownfield tax credits that will finance the project.



A rendering of the Chalmers Apartments at Highland Park, viewed from the parking area and central courtyard.

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That property takes up most of a city block. It is bordered by Holden to the west, Chalmers Avenue to the north, Central Park Avenue to the south, and another 2.5 acres of vacant cleared land to the east toward Hill Street. And it is surrounded by mostly residential homes, with Main Street's commercial district just to the west, along with Metro Rail and Metro Bus access for easy access to downtown.





THE CHALMERS APARTMENTS AT HIGHLAND PARK

A color diagram of the site plan for the Chalmers Apartments at Highland Park.

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Plans call for construction of six buildings around the edges of rectangular grassy parcel, like a college quad, with pathways crisscrossing through the center, where a new fenced-in playground would be located, surrounded by a community greenspace courtyard.



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EXTERIOR PERSPECTIVE | CORNER OF NORTH & EAST

A rendering of the northeast corner of the Chalmers Apartments at Highland Park.

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The two large L-shaped buildings, each about 72,000 square feet, would be located at the northeast and northwest corners of the property along Chalmers. One would have 77 apartments, while the other would have 78 units.



A rendering of the Chalmers Apartments at Highland Park, toward the northeast from the courtyard.

Buffalo Planning Board



On the southern end of the property, the four-townhome cluster would be constructed along the north side of Central Park, with two four-unit buildings on the ends and two six-unit buildings in the middle. The central area would also contain 104 surface parking spaces, with 39 on-street spaces on Chalmers. Two driveway entrances from Chalmers and Central Park would provide vehicle access

to the site.



A rendering of the Chalmers Apartments at Highland Park, in back.

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The 168,836-square-foot project will include a mix of one- and two-bedroom units in the big buildings, located at 125 and 175 Chalmers. They would range in size from 635 to 689 square feet for the one-bedrooms and 855 to 950 square feet for the two-bedroom units, plus a pair of 592-square-foot studio apartments, according to the designs by LaBella Associates and Wendel Companies.

Meanwhile, the townhomes all have three bedrooms, varying from 1,131 to 1,344 square feet in size. Those buildings v Up Next - RELATED NEWS: - Scientists Warn Humanity at 'Code... Park.





A rendering of the Chalmers Apartments townhomes at dusk.

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Rents will be affordable for tenants earning 30% to 60% of the area median income, and will be awarded by lottery. About 87 apartments would be reserved for those eligible under the state Homeless Housing and Assistance Program. Those units, totaling 119 beds, would include one-bedroom units for singles, two-bedroom apartments with three beds and three-bedroom units that will include five beds.



A daytime rendering of the Chalmers Apartments townhomes.

Buffalo Planning Board

Arc and BestSelf have already engaged in "extensive community and stakeholder

outreach" with city, county and state officials, block-club leaders, the Elim Christian Fellowship and members of the community, including through a community meeting on Sept. 27, Haubenreich wrote. The team already relocated the playground to the center of the site based on safety concerns, but has otherwise "received positive feedback and support," she added.



Another daytime rendering of the Chalmers Apartments townhomes.

Buffalo Planning Board

The project received subdivision and site plan approval from the Buffalo Planning Board on Monday.





A nighttime rendering of the Chalmers Apartments townhomes.

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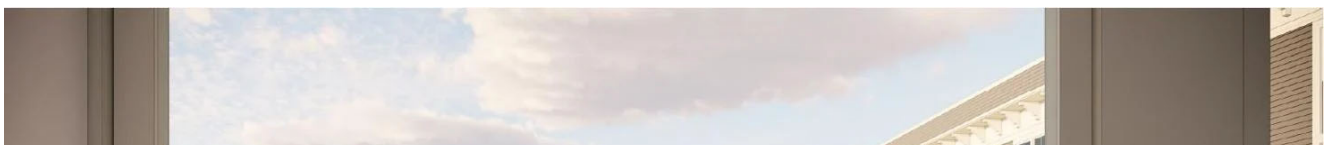
Ciminelli and BestSelf still need to secure the financing for the project, including 4% low-income housing tax credits, American Rescue Plan dollars from Erie County, and HHAP funding. They also plan to seek tax breaks from the Erie County Industrial Development Agency.



Another nighttime rendering of the Chalmers Apartments townhomes.

Buffalo Planning Board

If approved, construction would begin by early summer 2024, with completion after 18 months. Then, Ciminelli said, there's the rest of the acreage, which the community is already asking about.





A rendering of the Chalmers Apartments from inside, through a window.

Buffalo Planning Board

“Once we get this closed and underway, we’ll shift our gaze to figure out the possibilities for the rest,” Ciminelli said, citing interest in more townhouse or single-family homes for ownership. “We’re biting off what we can chew, and we’ll re-examine what we want to do with the rest. We have to explore what might be possible.”

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