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FRIDAY

NOVEMBER 9, 2007



Work proceeds atop the Clare at Water Tower, where construction began after the Franciscan Sisters of Chicago Service Corp. sent nearly 30,000 surveys to property owners living within 10 miles.

Photos for the Tribune by Joel Wintermantel



When completed, the Clare at Water Tower will begin accepting residents in 2009.

## REACHING OUT

Before building senior housing, developers poll communities

By Dan Rafter  
Special to the Tribune

**M**ary Leary presided over 50 meetings with neighbors, all to ease the concerns they had regarding the new continuing care retirement community that her organization, Mather LifeWays, was proposing in Evanston.

The Franciscan Sisters of Chicago Service Corp. sent nearly 30,000 surveys to property owners living within 10 miles of the Clare at Water Tower, a high-rise senior citizens community to be built in Chicago's Gold Coast neighborhood.

The goal? To find out exactly what property owners wanted to see, and didn't want to see, in a new seniors development.

Both efforts at community outreach may seem excessive. But Leary, president and chief executive officer of Evanston-based Mather LifeWays, and Julie Secviar, senior vice president of strategic resources for the Franciscan Sisters, say that their efforts helped them to quickly discover—and react to—any concerns community members had with their projects.

And all those mailings and meetings paid off. Construction has begun on the Clare and the Mather, Mather LifeWays' new senior project.

Other developers hoping to create senior housing communities have not been as fortunate. Neighbors often have a mix of concerns when they hear about new projects. Some of these are specific to senior housing, while others are common to any new development. If things get out of hand, these concerns, and the angry neighbors that fill city and village council meetings, can quickly scuttle

a senior housing project.

Leary, Secviar and others, though, offer a blueprint for successfully guiding such projects through the approval process. The key, they say, is to keep in constant communication with neighbors, tackle concerns as soon as community members air them and compromise when necessary.

Developers that don't follow such advice run the risk of seeing their senior projects run aground. That can be unfortunate because many older residents want to remain in or near their communities. They may not be able to do so if too few senior-targeted residential communities are available.

"The management of the Mather made every effort to bring the community into the process," said Jim Wolinski, community development director with the city of Evanston.

"They held an incredible amount of non-required meetings with the neighbors," he said. "They brought them up to date on construction plans, showed them renderings of the buildings, how

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## SENIOR: Neighbors are key to effort

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it would impact traffic."

Wolinski said Mather management "worked with the neighbors on the project's height, something that is always a concern. They knew what their needs were, but always kept an open mind about their neighbors' needs, too. They tried to incorporate where they could the concerns the neighbors had about the design. They tried to make it a win-win for everyone."

As a result, the Mather easily received approval from the city. The first units of the 243 apartment homes for independent living and other units for seniors requiring more intense medical care, will become available in 2009. Other developers, though, have not been so lucky. In northwest Indiana, members of the Merrillville Plan Commission earlier this year voted against a proposed senior housing development because developers could not guarantee that only senior citizens would live in the building.

Howard Fink, community development director for Merrillville, said the developers, because they were turned down by the plan commission, must wait one year before approaching the city again.

Developers of both the Clare



Window glaziers work in what will become the chapel area at The Clare at Watertown, a high-rise senior living complex.

Photo for the Tribune by Joel Wintermantle

and Mather worked hard to avoid that fate. It will allow Carol Niebling, along with her husband, Ralph, to move into the Clare once their unit is completed in the fall of 2008.

The Nieblings, who have lived in the same Northwest Side home for the last 17 years, made the decision to move to the Clare after seeing a brochure advertising the new facility.

"We got the literature in the mail. My husband looked at it and handed it to me. We looked at each other. We knew right then that the Clare was where we were going to retire," Carol

Niebling said. "What's not to like? We'll be close to the museums and the theater. We're walkers, so we can walk to Oak Street beach and the Lincoln Park Zoo. It has a pool, a gym, a library, everything. Everything I want is right there. I can't see a negative."

Developers of senior communities — whether they are targeted toward those in good health or those who need medical care, strive to make the developments enjoyable places to live.

Seniors find they can remain even if their health deteriorates. As continuing care com-

munities, they allow senior citizens to move from independent living to assisted living to nursing care.

The demand for such centers is high. If developers can't get past the concerns of city councils and skeptical neighbors, that demand may go unmet.

The Franciscan Sisters requested input from the Greater North Michigan Avenue Association and the Streeterville Organization of Active Residents on how they could design the Clare so that it would impact the views of as few neighbors as possible. They incorporated these suggestions into

their plans.

"In any new development, whether it be for senior citizens or anyone else, you have to solicit input from both potential buyers and from the community," Secviar said. "You have to do a lot of homework upfront. We worked proactively with the community on this project. We solicited input before we moved forward. That's the best way to go."

In Evanston neighbors wanted Mather LifeWays to preserve some of the green space around the building.

The new building, then, will include nearly two acres of open place, to include flowering trees, a community lawn, formal planting beds and a rose garden.

The developers of senior housing need to promote the benefits that such housing brings to a community, said Chris Naatz, vice president of sales and marketing for Pulte Homes, parent company of Del Webb, the nationally known developer of senior communities.

The company has four active senior developments in Illinois: Sun City Huntley in Huntley, Shorewood Glen in Shorewood, Edgewater in Elgin and Grand Dominion in Mundelein.

"Municipalities want to keep residents in their towns or cities," Naatz said.

"They don't want their longtime residents moving to another place to retire. They want to keep them in their communities. By having active senior communities, municipalities can keep their residents from having to seek out somewhere else to live."