

ALLENDALE

New residents to call Crescent Commons home come January

BY KAREN KLEIMANN
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The Allendale community officially welcomed new West Crescent Avenue residents last Monday morning with the ribbon-cutting and opening of Crescent Commons, a special needs housing community in the borough.

State, county and local officials discussed how this "vision" became a reality, starting as an idea in 2007 and becoming an example to which the state looks for other towns to emulate. And while Allendale Mayor Vince Barra said the borough happily accepted these new residents, he and other officials couldn't help but note how many others are still in need of housing.

For these 24 residents, who have Down Syndrome, Multiple Sclerosis and forms of Autism, they're celebrating more than a new home, they're embarking on a journey to break the stigma that often comes with having special needs.

Reverend Michael Allen, of Trinity Episcopal Church, said Allendale is "celebrating all the wonderful gifts you are bringing with you ... we're celebrating community and just how much communities mean to us."

And that's what officials wanted to leave as a message - community means more than just living in a place. It is about giving and receiving, something the mayor said he expects of all residents, including those who will live in Crescent Commons.

"The 24 men and women that
 SEE COMMONS, PAGE 6
 will call Crescent Commons 'home,' are individuals with disabilities who want nothing more

than to live active and independent lives in safe affordable homes, with supportive services they need to succeed in doing so," the Crescent Commons pamphlet states.

Bergen County United Way's Director of Communications Gina Plotino said Allendale is creating an example of helping an underserved population.

"Allendale has demonstrated itself to be a community of caring and warmth and it has welcomed residents with open arms," she said.

Bergen County's United Way provides information assistance, living and financial resources to populations in need within communities.

Barra said he even got a bit teary-eyed knowing that these new residents had been "waiting such a long time for housing," adding that the borough wants to be "a beacon; that light that everyone in the state will follow."

He credited the governing bodies of Allendale, including the council, Planning and Zoning boards, in addition to the Allendale Housing Inc., Bergen United Way and Madeline Corp., Z+Architects, E-Tomic General Contracting, and countless people, all of which he said lead to the special needs housing communities in the borough.

"You touch a whole number of people," the mayor said, adding that the "real heroes are the residents of Allendale" because when a community provides housing for a dozen people, it really affects hundreds.

The borough is also partnering with the Wyckoff YMCA, which already has special needs activities, but will now include activities at Crescent Commons, Barra said.

Special needs housing isn't new in Allendale. Orchard Commons

opened in 2010 and was hailed a success by the state, as well as local residents and officials. The borough was the recipient of the Governor's Excellence in Housing Award, and state officials called Orchard Commons the "Best Supportive Housing in New Jersey."

But it's not just a change for the borough, the mayor said these new residents will be able to live independently, which they will start to do come Jan. 1. And parents may also find some relief and peace, knowing their children can live in a community where they will be supported, but still live on their own, he said.

Barra said a parent shared that sentiment and expressed gratitude for the borough understanding that developmental and physical conditions affect families, not just individuals.

Crescent Commons residents, like Zack Hamrick, who led the Pledge of Allegiance, smiled and cheered when the ribbon was cut. Hamrick said he is very happy to soon be at Crescent Commons and is excited to live on his own.

The mayor said another resident saw what will be her room and said "it feels like Christmas."

Crescent Commons has seven two-bedroom and 10 one-bedroom units. A second phase, six town homes that will be sold as affordable housing, will soon be under way.

The project costs \$5.8 million and came from a number of different organizations. The mayor said the N.J. Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency provided \$3.3 million, the County of Bergen HOME Program gave \$600,000 and the N.J. Division of Developmental Disabilities provided \$250,000.

In addition, the Federal Home Loan Bank gave \$350,000 and the



borough, through its Allendale Housing Inc., gave \$1.25 million. The Allendale housing trust is funded by fees paid by developers and earmarked exclusively for affordable housing, the mayor said.

Barra said there was an extensive selection process and it was hard to tell applicants they only had so many rooms available.

Each applicant must have a diagnosed developmental disability from a licensed professional, demonstrate the ability to live independently without supervision, self-medicate, meet eligibility requirements for a low-income housing voucher, among other requirements, according to the Bergen County United Way web-

site states.

The mayor said the state is in dire need of housing for those with special needs. Currently about 8,000 people are on a waiting list and if "other towns did one-third of what we've done, that would take care of this waiting list," Barra said.

"This project in large measure was created as part of the Special Needs Housing Trust Fund and it's now depleted," said Anthony Marchetta, executive director of the N.J. Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency.

He said the state had \$200 million, which has now been spent.

"You've done great as a community and let's do more throughout the state of New Jersey," Mar-

chetta said.

He urged residents to encourage their representatives to look into finding ways to fund special needs housing, adding, "you are the believers, you understand how important this is," to individuals and their families.

"These people are a credit to us, not a burden," Barra said, adding that even the term "developmentally disabled" has negative connotations. "They are not disabled, they're special," he said. "You have gifts that we don't have and those gifts are special."

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Allendale's Crescent Commons special needs housing community opened last Monday. Mayor Vince Barra helped welcome the 24 new residents to their home, where they will receive support but still live independently starting Jan.1.