

Washington Village tenants excited to finally move

By Kaitlyn Krasselt



Photo: Erik Trautmann / Hearst Connecticut Media

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Washington Village residents including Mary Kingwood voice concerns on Thursday, January 5, 2017, about their planned relocation out of the Washington Village public housing complex, Connecticut's oldest, ... more

NORWALK — After more than a decade of planning, the residents of Washington Village are getting antsy as they wait to move out of the decades-old housing project.

“It took us a long time to get this far,” said [Michele Bonet](#), who’s lived in the complex for two years. “I’m packing. I’m ready to go as soon as they say so.

Just give me my voucher and I'll be on my way.”

Bonet, who has attended most of the public meetings regarding the project, and receives a phone call from the Choice Neighborhoods team every month updating her on the status of the project. She said she feels well-informed on the project and the process, and doesn't anticipate any difficulties in the move.

That seems to be the consensus among tenants, most of whom said they're simply excited for the project to finally be under way. Constant communication from the Norwalk [Housing Authority](#) and Choice Neighborhoods Project has left many feeling confident about moving from their longtime homes.

“They've said they will help with everything from finding a new place to helping us move so I'm not worried,” Bonet said.

Gov. [Dannel P. Malloy](#) and upward of 170 others gathered Nov. 28 for a ceremonial groundbreaking. Officials had hoped to see construction start in December. Delays pushed the estimated start date to January.

Work will continue throughout 2017 with a new three-story apartment building opening at 13 Day St. at the end of 2017 and a five-story building opening at 20 Day St. in early 2018. Of the new apartments, 40 will be for public-housing residents, 18 for moderate-income households and 22 will be priced as market-rate units, according to the Housing Authority.

The project will be done in phases, with some residents moving out sooner than others. Bonet anticipates she'll be in the first wave of current tenants to be moved.

The first phase includes the construction of two new buildings at 13 and 20 Day Street. Residents of the lower block of Washington Village will have the first opportunity to move into the new units as theirs will be the first of the

old units to hit the chopping block. Those in the remaining units likely won't be moved for a couple more years as construction on the second phase is completed.

[Mary Kingwood](#), a 45-year resident of Washington Village, said by the time the project gets far enough along that her units will move out, she'll likely be ready for the retirement home.

"I'm 71, so I'll just go straight to the senior living," she joked.

On a serious note, though, she said the project is a good thing and a long time coming.

"It needed renovation," Kingwood said. "It's time."

[Conan Robinson](#), a 10-year tenant, isn't quite as calm about the move and said he knows several people who are feeling nervous about the process. He said he feels the communication has been constant and helpful so far, but is a little nervous about the move because he's currently hunting for a job. The combination of being unsure about his employment and unsure about where he's going to live has left him a little uneasy.

"It's been nerve racking at times," Robinson said. "But it's been ongoing for a couple years so I knew this was coming ... I think it's going to be a good thing though. These are so old and it's good to upgrade to something new."

The larger Washington Village Transformation project — a roughly \$140 million undertaking — calls for razing Washington Village and its 136 apartments and building in their place 136 public-housing units, 67 workforce housing units and 70 market-rate units in two-, three- and four-story buildings.

The complex is being rebuilt under the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Choice Neighborhoods Program, which seeks to replace distressed public housing with quality mixed-income units while

providing residents job training, educational opportunities and other support services.

Tenant [Glenda Figueroa](#) is giddy at the mention of the project, and as a longtime Washington Village resident, praised the city and the Housing Authority for their efforts at not only moving forward with the project, but making the current Washington Village a more desirable place to live despite the circumstances.

“I love them because they give you opportunity,” Figueroa said. “They help the people and give opportunity for happiness and education.”

While people like Bonet, Kingwood, Figueroa and Robinson have made it to as many informational meetings as they can, that hasn’t always been possible for other residents. Tenant [Jeff Szerszen](#) said he hasn’t been able to attend a single meeting, and doesn’t have any idea when he might be moving.

”It’s ridiculous,” Szerszen said. “Nobody has given any indication ... and by the time they tell about the meeting it’s too late.”

Contributing: [Robert Koch](#)

KKrasselt@scni.com; 203-354-1021; @kaitlynkrasselt