

Uncommon 'Commons'

Housing for developmentally disabled

IT IS a classic North Jersey tale. A former farm estate, slated for development. Public outcry over possible floodplain construction, and worries about the view of town houses from across the property line.

This is the story of Allendale's Orchard Commons. Unlike so many others, it has an inspiring ending.

Allendale acquired the Orchard Commons land from a developer three years ago, built a park and allowed some town homes – but only six of the originally planned 24. This August, 10 developmentally disabled residents from Bergen County, with conditions such as Asperger's and Down syndromes, will move in. They will live independently, but receive on-site services and fellowship with one another in homes that are dignified, beautiful and integrated with the community.

This is fantastic news at a time when state-funded housing for the disabled is in such short supply, New Jersey faces a lawsuit. When the waiting list is 7,800 names long. When most adults are placed far into middle age, often only after their parents die. When we're decades past thinking the best place for a disabled adult is locked away in an institution.

The cheerful homes, with their peaked roofs and breezy windows, were built by Bergen County's United Way and inspired by the state's affordable housing law. Many towns have lagged in their affordable housing commitments, since private developers usually agree to build low-cost units only as part of a much bigger project. The non-profit has

stepped into that void since making affordable housing its top priority, using donations and state grants to purchase land and manage construction of low-income-only developments, Staff Writer Harvy Lipman reported.

The projects appeal to towns because they avoid sprawl. And the agency has doubled its do-good quotient by designating its buildings for people with special needs, including the disabled and senior citizens. It expects to build a second project for disabled adults in Allendale next year.

This is exactly the right role for the United Way. The large charity has the bureaucratic expertise and deep pockets to guide towns through New Jersey's numerous development and environmental regulations. It is creating a model by which communities can satisfy their legal obligation for affordable housing and moral obligation to provide supportive, non-institutional homes for disabled adults.

Let there be no delay in building many more such homes in North Jersey and throughout the state. Disabled adults and their families have waited long enough.



Orchard Commons construction.

