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Central Station development taking shape in West Oakland

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By Cecily Burt

OAKLAND —New condominiums sit empty around the city as buyers stay away, but moving vans have been steady visitors to new developments along Wood Street in West Oakland.

The new homeowners are breathing life into what had been a no man's land wedged between the Prescott neighborhood of West Oakland and Interstate 880, an area that until recently was better known as a repository for truck parking and illegal dumping. They are walking their pets around the neighborhood and establishing Neighborhood Watch groups and e-mail communities to cut down on crime.

Recently, a colorful cafe offering free Wi-Fi access opened in a restored industrial loft, and the owner plans to open a yoga studio upstairs.

Small steps, sure, but it's only the beginning, area residents say.

A redevelopment plan that Oakland city leaders approved four years ago calls for as many as 1,500 new homes — collectively called the Central Station project — to replace 26 dusty acres surrounding a restored Southern Pacific train depot. The depot has been shuttered since the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

The busts in housing and banking dogged sales in the 163-unit Pacific Cannery Lofts, one of the first of the developments to get under way. But things have loosened up in recent months: Fifty-seven units, nearly all in the historic Pacific Coast Cannery building, have been sold and 21 have closed escrow, said Gail Stark, sales director. Another 15 townhouses will go on sale this weekend, she said.

No empty buildings

Unlike the cannery, the 130-unit Zephyr Creek development filling in the blocks between 12th and 14th streets is constructed in stages as units are sold. People move in as soon as

their townhouses are finished so there are no empty buildings, said Sandy Richert, sales manager for Pulte Homes. So far 74 homes have been built and sold; 63 of those have closed escrow and the new owners have moved in.

"It's gorgeous. It's the best thing that ever happened to us," said Marilyn Reynolds, a longtime homeowner who lives nearby and has endured the blight of those empty blocks for years. "The area is really looking up and looking better."

Nick Williams, 26, an elementary school teacher at Aurora School in North Oakland, was one of the early pioneers. He and his partner Nelson Fernandez took a chance and bought a Zephyr Gate townhouse in January 2008, when there was nothing but empty lots all around.

"It worked out great," he said one recent weekday while out walking his pug, Ninja. "This neighborhood is really quiet and great. We're in it for the long haul."

The location is close to San Francisco, where Fernandez works, and they like to ride their bikes to the Emeryville Marina. One drawback is the lack of a nearby grocery store and other amenities, although the addition of more residents in the area will likely spur some retail growth over time.

David Ghadimi, 47, a union electrician and jack of many trades who was laid off in September after finishing work on the California Academy of Sciences building in Golden Gate Park, is also a pioneer of sorts.

He moved to an industrial loft across the street from Central Station four years ago and decided recently to build a cafe. Galatea Cafe opened six weeks ago, filled with colorful art created by his girlfriend and offering free Wi-Fi and a range of coffees, smoothies and breakfast and lunch fare. There is a chessboard on one of

the tables and Ghadimi, who is also a massage therapist, plans to open a yoga studio upstairs.

'Crime really went down'

Ghadimi said he has noticed a big change in the neighborhood since the vacant blocks have been filled in with new homes and new residents.

"Before we were calling the cops every night," he said. "People were trying to break in the building and breaking into cars, so we formed a neighborhood association. There were three crack houses around here and we helped close them down. When the last one on 14th Street closed, crime really went down."

Ghadimi attributed that drop partly to police responding sooner to 911 calls, but the strength in numbers fueled by new residents moving to the area helped, too.

"(The criminals) started seeing us as not so much of an easy target," he said.

Several developments will shape the Central Station project. In addition to the Pacific Cannery Lofts and Zephyr Gate townhouses, the 99-unit Iron Horse affordable rental complex should open this fall. However, construction has been delayed on a large market-rate apartment complex on a key block between 14th and 16th streets, closest to the old train station.

Reynolds said there is no comparison between the junkie old trailers that used to populate the Zephyr Creek lots and what she sees there now.

"The trailers have been replaced by new homes for people, students and teachers and lawyers," she said. "And the increased tax (revenue) will trickle down to the community."