

# Seattle: Older Adults Key to Neighborhood Revitalization

**Seattle, Washington**, is a city of more than 560,000 people, which covers 84 square miles (2000 Census). It is located in Washington State between Puget Sound and Lake Washington and nearly 108 miles south of Canada. Approximately 12% of Seattle's residents are 65 years old and over. Median rent, at the time of the 2000 Census, was \$721. Median monthly homeowner costs, for people with mortgages, were \$1,497.

The Courtland in Seattle, Washington, is a five-story building with affordable senior housing and commercial/retail space in a neighborhood with great need for moderately priced homes. It was built on the site of a former brownfield that was cleaned up and redeveloped after decades of industrial pollution and use as an unofficial garbage dump. The new building is located near existing stores and is well served by public transportation.

The Courtland represents a prime example of the potential impact of a successful partnership between local government and a community group. It is the first completed portion of neighborhood revitalization efforts of a local community development agency, called Southeast Effective Development (SEED), which is redeveloping the brownfield site known as Rainier Court to meet the needs of Seattle's underserved Rainier Valley community. The project was made possible with financial and technical assistance provided by Seattle and King County officials. It also benefited from the collaboration and support of Rainier Valley community leaders, city and county public officials, and business groups, opening in December 2004.

## The Need for the Courtland

While Rainier Valley is the most racially and culturally diverse neighborhood in Seattle, it also is the poorest and has suffered years of crime and



decline. Consequently, little development has occurred in the area. In 2001, the median income for a family of four in Southeast Seattle, where Rainier Valley is located, was 60% of the city's median income. Few developers have shown any interest in building the affordable housing the area needs, and over the years, the unmet demand for moderately priced housing has continued to grow.

SEED astutely identified the Rainier Court site as one in need of substantial revitalization in order to be of use to the community again. It also was appealing because of its location across the street from a previous SEED development project, Rainier Valley Square Shopping Center. The site sits in a topographically low area of Rainier Valley, where it had often served as a construction debris dumping site for the city. The property also had been used for industrial businesses such as an electrical warehouse/maintenance facility, an auto shop, and a machining operation. After three decades, the Rainier Court site that SEED took over was nothing more than a mix of dilapidated buildings, fenced off lots, and overgrown weeds.

## The Courtland in Rainier Court

In 1996, SEED began taking steps to transform the site through a four-phase process from a contaminated industrial dumping ground to a cleaned-up location for affordable housing and a commercial/retail complex. The first two phases have been completed and the last two are in the conceptual-planning stage. The Courtland building was constructed during the first phase of the project and completed in December 2004. It includes 208 affordable senior housing rental units for low- and moderate-income older adults and 9,000 square feet of retail/commercial space. The retail space is expected to attract neighborhood-oriented specialty shops and services. Already, the Seattle Metropolitan Credit Union and H & R Block have moved in as the first commercial tenants in the Courtland. Other retail businesses, including an independent coffee shop, are currently negotiating with SEED to become future occupants.

Rainier Court is conveniently located across the street from the Rainier Valley Square Shopping Center and within walking distance of recreation and medical facilities. In addition to the nearby retail and businesses, the Courtland also has a rooftop garden that is open to all of its residents. On the ground floor, the site features a pedestrian promenade, and residents have easy access to public transportation, with three bus routes serving the property and two light rail stations located just a quarter-mile away. During future phases of construction, a park will be created and open spaces will be landscaped. Residents of the Courtland also will have the benefit of being close to the neighborhood stores that are planned for other mixed-use developments on the Rainier Court site.

The Courtland has been so successful that SEED is planning to build more senior housing in the third phase of development.

## Creating the Courtland

Through its work in the community, SEED knew that residents wanted more affordable housing—especially housing for older adult residents—and job opportunities. SEED saw the underutilized Rainier Court land as an opportunity to address those needs. The city and county were very supportive of the project for the same reasons. SEED’s plan to transform a vacant site into much needed housing matched the city’s plans for the area. As part of Seattle’s growth control regulations, the 1994 Master Plan designated the neighborhood as one of its new urban villages, an indication that the city wanted higher density development to be built in Rainier Valley. After doing some research on the feasibility, SEED determined that it could build affordable housing that complied with these new regulations. The city was excited about the project because SEED’s work would allow the Rainier Valley neighborhood to remain affordable to local residents, despite the rising property values that would likely result from the higher density demanded by the city’s growth management plans.

The city’s plan also considers Rainier Valley a “distressed district,” so the area is supposed to receive more consideration for financial assistance from the city. However, SEED’s economic development manager, Pat Chemnick, says financial support from the city was due more to the overall support of the past three city administrations than because of the “distressed district” designation. After determining that affordable housing could be supported in the area, SEED began purchasing land on the vacant site.

A major challenge arose when it became clear that the land was an undocumented landfill site contaminated with harmful chemicals. It was only after SEED had started purchasing the property that it learned from the

city that the land was contaminated and needed to be cleaned up before any development could be considered.

So, in 2000, SEED began going through the site cleanup process. It began with a contamination assessment by the Environmental Protection Agency, which confirmed that the soil and groundwater were contaminated. In order to cut down on cleanup costs, the Rainier Court strategy was to only remove soil when necessary. In other places, buildings and paving were designed to cover or cap as much of the contaminated soil as possible. The site was enrolled in the state Department of Ecology Voluntary Cleanup Program, which reviews site cleanup plans and determines whether or not a plan should be effective. After the review, the Rainier Court plan was determined to be an effective cleanup approach, so the Department of Ecology wrote a letter supporting the plan. That letter was then used to convince investors and banks that the redevelopment of the site was a worthwhile investment.

## Financing the Courtland

The City of Seattle and King County provided their support for the project through financial and technical assistance. King County and Seattle officials worked very closely on the project because they are a Brownfields Showcase Community, which is an EPA program. They also work together to operate the King County/City of Seattle Brownfields Program. Through the program, the county and city applied for an EPA assessment of the site and a state cleanup loan. From the county, the project received \$25,500 in EPA funds for the removal of underground storage tanks, and money for groundwater sampling. The county also funds the Environmental Coalition of Seattle, which provided free brownfield cleanup technical assistance to SEED.

The city provided funding for the project from Community Development Block Grants and low-income housing tax credits. The Office of Economic Development and the Office of Hous-

ing provided more than \$7.6 million in Community Development Block Grant loans and \$1.6 million in other federal grants for site assembly and pre-design work. SEED also received low-income housing tax credits to help build the Rainier Court housing and retail. The city also helped during the permitting process, making SEED’s applications a priority because of the low-income housing tax credit deadlines.

## Success/Challenges

Buying and cleaning up the property was not a quick and easy process. Land for the site was owned by 18 different property owners and funding for the project, coming from multiple sources, was disjointed. In its original plan for the site, SEED had hoped to build on a larger lot, which would have allowed for more commercial space. But two property owners refused to sell their properties. The cleanup process for the land was a trial because of the seriousness of the contaminants found in the ground, and the cleanup and testing cost the organization \$1 million. According to Chemnick, SEED would not have been able to complete the enormously challenging cleanup and redevelopment project without the assistance and financial support of the city and county.

Collaboration between SEED, representing the residents, and the city and county, allowed Rainier Court to become a reality.

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