

# Affordable Housing Project Targets Working-Class Renters

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**Bristol Herald Courier**  
**November 17, 2008**

ABINGDON, Va. – It might be as nice as any subdivision in town, but this one is not for profit. Plus, it's only for regular, working-class folks.

Officials at People Inc., the Southwest Virginia organization building 10 attractive duplexes off Elementary Drive, said the Sweetbriar project will pay for itself – and it's a break for working people in need of affordable housing.

“A lot of the housing built in and around Abingdon is out of the price range of folks who work in the stores and on the police force and beginning teachers, ministers, health care workers,” said Mike Rush, director of housing for People Inc. “The idea is to offer them a place that they can rent that they can afford that's nice.”

The project is one of five energy-efficient affordable housing projects People Inc. has going in Southwest Virginia – and they are going up in a hurry amid a tough economy.

The reason? Federal tax credits that make it possible for these projects to pay for themselves, and they were awarded with a deadline.

Rush said tax credits that People Inc., which as a nonprofit is tax exempt, received for the work were sold to investors to help fund the projects.

“This isn't subsidized housing, so if you're thinking it should look more like the hood, it's not going to because it's not subsidized by taxpayer dollars,” Rush said. “We're trying to fill a gap ... in the affordable housing market, and nobody else wants to do that.”

Danny Wilson, construction superintendent for the Sweetbriar project in Abingdon, said each of the 20 apartments will have three bedrooms, two and a half baths and a garage. They will be finished in mid-2009.

“They're all going to have hardwood flooring and ceramic tile, [and] a majority of them are brick. ... We could've built them cheaper by using cheaper materials, but we're using a lot of high-tech, state of the art materials that are upscale to just your standard materials,” Wilson said. “We want a quality construction so it makes a nice home and it also, on our end, on the maintenance end of things, it cuts our maintenance costs in the future.”

Nice is a theme that carries over to the agency's other projects as well, including renovations under way at Abingdon Green, a 32-unit senior housing complex off of White's Mill Road.

“You had to practically stand over by it to get warm,” resident Lloyd Whiteside said of the old heating system in his newly renovated apartment. “[Now] when it heats up in here, it stays warm.”

New heating and cooling systems are just one aspect of the renovation. The organization is installing new bamboo and tile flooring, adding and replacing appliances and bathroom fixtures, improving energy efficiency, and giving the units a fresh coat of paint.

Chris Justice, crew leader for People Inc., said the changes are “to improve the quality of life for the people that live here in Abingdon Green.” Also, he said, “It’s greener than it was before.” Rush said all of the projects are being built according to EarthCraft energy efficiency standards. Earthcraft is an environmentally friendly building program created in 1999, with the help of builders and power companies.

Rush said the Sweetbriar units cost about \$125,000 each to build; renovation of the Abingdon Green apartments – as well as 40 similar apartments in Norton and 44 in Pulaski – cost about \$25,000 each.

The rent at Sweetbriar, for which an 11-unit expansion is already planned, will be in the \$400 range on a sliding scale and will be accessible to families who earn 50 percent to 60 percent of the area’s median income, Rush said.

The fifth project under way is Dante Crossing, a \$1.1 million renovation of the old Clinchfield Coal Co. office building in Dante that will create 12 apartments.

Plans are also in the works for affordable housing in the Lebanon area, in Clintwood and in Tazewell County.

“It makes a whole lot of sense to be able to have a work force live comfortably where they work,” Rush said. “We’re meeting a need and probably doing what most people would consider to be a pretty good thing without the taxpayers carrying it on their back and without government being involved anymore than in the criteria and whatnot.”