

Elmsford Housing Developer Tabbed to Build Housing at Former Reader's Digest Headquarters

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The centerpiece of the former Reader's Digest HQ building will be converted into 64 rental apartments.

CHAPPAQUA—Development firm Wilder Balter Partners of Elmsford has been selected to turn the iconic cupola building of the former Reader's Digest headquarters here into a unique and innovative mix of market rate, workforce and affordable apartment homes—The Apartments at Chappaqua Crossing.

The Elmsford-based developer has signed a long-term lease for the classic building with Summit/Greenfield Partners, owners and developers of

Chappaqua Crossing. The deal was announced on Sept. 13. Construction on the \$21-million redevelopment has commenced with interior demolition work. Completion is expected to take 16 to 18 months, with an anticipated opening in the spring of 2018.

The 1939 centerpiece of the sprawling 690,000-square-foot Reader's Digest office building will be converted into 64 apartments—25 market rate, 10 workforce, 28 affordable and one superintendent's apartment. The affordable apartments will qualify under the housing settlement agreement between Westchester County and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, according to Summit/Greenfield Partners.

William Balter, president of Wilder Balter Partners, is taking a personal interest in overseeing the construction in the four-story, cupola-topped Georgian-style brick building that is a familiar site to travelers passing on the nearby MetroNorth Harlem Line and Saw Mill River Parkway. "I absolutely love this building," he said. "It is really spectacular in so many ways and is one of the most recognized buildings in all of Westchester."

Felix Charney, president of Summit Development and a partner in Summit/Greenfield, said the idea to use the signature Cupola building for housing emerged late in the now 12-year process of seeking approvals from the Town of New Castle to develop new uses for the 116-acre corporate campus. "We were finding it difficult to find tenants for the office space in this portion of the building," he said. "As a result, a lot of different ideas were discussed including moving the town offices there. But nothing seemed to be the right fit. Then we hit on the idea of affordable housing apartments and everything clicked."

Charney said that conversations with the town officials and planners and Balter expanded from the idea of using the two floors for 28 affordable units, to taking all four floors of the tower-topped structure for a full residential building. "The town liked the idea of having market rate and town workforce units in the same building. We agreed and are pleased to be working with Wilder Balter to bring this vision to life.

He noted that the housing complements the 91 townhouses, 120,000-square-foot retail area featuring a Whole Foods Market and Life Time Fitness, and the extensive office uses that will all be on the site. "Chappaqua Crossing provides opportunities for employment, access to services and schools and will have shuttle service to the Chappaqua MetroNorth station and the downtown business district," he said. "It's taken a very long time to get here, but the end result is a creative blending of reimagined existing space and new

space that will be a truly unique property in Westchester with the Cupola building as the beacon for the entire site.”

Balter noted that the Georgian style chosen by Reader’s Digest founders Dewitt and Lila Acheson Wallace created an architecturally beautiful building. “The quality of the building we have to work with will result in a truly unique adaptive re-use.

He added, “The investment in high-quality materials and the attention to detail that was given by the Wallaces in building the Readers Digest executive offices, are something we just don’t see anymore. Frankly, even 75 years ago this level of quality was unusual, and fortunately it has been extremely well maintained. It’s a special building that deserves a special approach. We are thrilled to have the opportunity to be working with it.”

Balter said that his company has undertaken a number of renovations and adaptive re-use developments over the years. “For example, we created housing in the historically significant former Orange County Infirmary in Goshen that turned out beautifully. “But this project is in a league of its own because of the way that the scale and grace of the building provides such a terrific canvas to create beautiful living spaces and common elements for our residents to enjoy,” he said.

The original Reader’s Digest rotunda entry at the center of the building will be retained and furnished with photographs and the history of the Readers Digest property. The original wood-paneled, octagon-shaped library with its ceiling-high built-in bookcases will also be retained and available to the residents of the apartments. “We’ll reuse it as a library with books and magazines,” Balter said. Comfortable new couches and seating areas will be added. In the light-filled library, a set of French doors and two large windows will continue to open to a large terrace.

As part of the reconstruction, a pair of large interior courtyards will be kept as quiet contemplative spaces. The Parisian balconies overlooking the courtyards will also be restored and retained, along with interior columns, fountains and bluestone flooring.

Whenever possible, original architectural details will become part of the new apartments. The four oversized circular windows in each 4th-floor gabled corners of the building will become living room focal points in four of the apartments. The former Reader’s Digest president’s office will become a generously proportioned corner apartment. Wilder Balter is also saving all of

the exterior features of the building including the Cupola, the handsome ornamental chimneys on the roof as well as the original wooden windows.

On the west side of the first floor, 16-foot ceilings with 11-foot tall windows will provide an opportunity to create stunning loft apartments overlooking the Saw Mill River Valley. The master bedrooms will look down on open, two-story living rooms.

The 64 apartments will include a mix of one-, two- and three-bedroom units. The affordable, workforce and market rate units will be blended throughout the building and all residents will have access to the common elements that will include a gym, kitchen, great room looking out to the two courtyards, library and outdoor play area. Residents will also enjoy the other Chappaqua elements, including Whole Foods, Lifetime Fitness, other neighborhood retail, walking trails and a shuttle bus to and from the village of Chappaqua.

Westchester County, the New York State Housing Finance Agency, Citibank Community Capital and First Sterling all provided financing for Chappaqua Crossing Apartments.

Westchester County Executive Robert P. Astorino said Chappaqua Crossing was a prime example of the county's commitment to working collaboratively to develop affordable housing.

"Chappaqua Crossing illustrates how communities, developers and government can work together to produce creative answers for addressing the need of affordable housing," said Astorino. "Not only does this development provide homes for families across the economic spectrum, it does so in a way that offers modern amenities and still retains the irreplaceable historic features of the property."

Town Supervisor Rob Greenstein, who played a key role in moving the overall project including the housing component forward, said, "I was very proud when late last year, the Town Board adopted the Local Law that is allowing Summit Greenfield to relocate its affordable housing units to the Cupola Building. We will now have 28 units of affordable housing in the iconic Cupola Building, and they will be integrated with additional workforce and market rate units. This project exemplifies how new and affordable housing options can be woven into the fabric of a community. When completed, the Cupola Building will offer a mix of housing options in a beautiful, vibrant location."

The Apartments at Chappaqua will be part of the Chappaqua Crossing campus, a 116-acre residential, retail and office complex bordered by Bedford

Road (Route 117) and Roaring Brook Roads in the Chappaqua section of the Town of New Castle. The site includes 500,000 square feet of office space; 120,000 square feet of retail scheduled to open in 2017 including a Whole Foods Market, Life Time Fitness, a bank, shops and restaurants; 93 townhomes to be built in the future; the former Wallace Auditorium that will become a town-owned community space; and more than 50 acres of permanent green space. Among the tenants of the office space are Mount Kisco Medical Group and Northern Westchester Hospital.