

Keep Morton Village a community asset

By DONALD ALEXIS

SPECIAL TO THE REPORTER

The sale of the Fairlawn Apartments, now known as SoMa, is a stinging memory fresh in the minds and hearts of many Mattapan residents. The 347-unit apartment complex was sold in 2018 to a market-rate developer who proceeded to transform this naturally occurring affordable housing residence into market rate apartments. One by one, the predominantly immigrant residents were forced from their homes as their rents were raised steeply and swiftly to levels unaffordable for them.

Now, with that past pain in their consciousness, and while facing daily financial hardships for themselves and their families as a result of COVID-19, Mattapan residents learned that the Morton Village Apartments has come on the market for sale. This was great timing — many were too distracted to notice. Like Fairlawn, Morton Village is home to working class and immigrant families. The fate of these 207 apartments will have a profound impact on the future of our community. What's in the balance is whether or not this development will be able to remain affordable housing for our already suffering community, thereby preserving Mattapan as the rich cultural melting pot cherished by its residents.

Caribbean Integration Community Development (CICD), a nonprofit organization that works to create and preserve affordable housing in Mattapan and surrounding areas, became aware of the impending sale last month. Determined to ensure that the Morton Village Apartments will not meet the same fate as the Fairlawn Apartments, we immediately got to work. We created a coalition of nonprofit leaders to acquire the property with The Planning Office for Urban Affairs, and held extensive conversations with public, quasi-public and private financial institutions to provide acquisition financing in order to protect this property as affordable housing for Mattapan families.

Through our exhaustive efforts, we secured the agreement of our lenders to make a competitive, market-rate offer through an expedited process—our

only means of competing with other for-profit buyers currently working to secure the sale. Let me be clear: We are committed to making a competitive, market-based offer and will move as swiftly as a for-profit developer. We are committed to do what is necessary to keep the complex as a community asset.

As the lone non-profit housing developer in Mattapan, CICD knows what's at stake. Many investors see Mattapan as fertile soil for gentrification. They understand that its immigrant community may be ill-equipped to advocate for their rights as tenants when confronted with wealthy investors who seek to displace them with unaffordable rents.

Over the past five years, CICD and POUA have successfully permitted 150 new affordable and workforce housing units for families, which are now in various stages of development. If we do not save these 207 units, the texture and culture of Mattapan will be altered forever. As a non-profit run by a Caribbean immigrant, CICD is in a position to purchase the Morton Village apartments at fair market price and be a voice and an ally for its residents -- making management decisions that are in the best interests of residents, rather than the bottom line.

It is my hope and my prayer that the seller will observe the cultural and social shift transpiring in our city, our country and our world, understand that, fundamentally individuals of color are suffering the most and take to heart that they at this moment, have an opportunity to help change the tide by deciding for CICD to manage the development. Choose wisely.

I am asking all residents of Mattapan concerned with maintaining the unique fabric of our community and keeping Mattapan affordable for working class families to join CICD in its efforts. We must make clear that the Morton Village Apartments cannot be a repeat of the Fairlawn fiasco. We must invest now an equitable community; we may not have another chance.

Donald Alexis is president of Caribbean Integration Community Development, Inc.