

Avenue CDC chief Mary Lawler champions affordable housing and community revitalization

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Mary Lawler, executive director of Avenue CDC, a nonprofit that develops affordable housing in Houston at one of their developments on Thursday, Aug. 1, 2019 in Houston.

Photo: Elizabeth Conley, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

When city or state leaders meet to talk about changes to roads, traffic or other issues that affect neighborhoods, Mary Lawler is in the audience, quietly taking stock of the information and the group dynamic. When civic groups meet to talk about coming changes such as disruption from new housing or apartment complexes, Lawler is there, too, a soft but persuasive voice in the crowd.

She's executive director of Avenue CDC, a nonprofit that began as a grassroots effort in the Old Sixth Ward that has grown in its nearly 25 years to be an effective champion for affordable housing and

community revitalization.

In its earliest days, Avenue CDC was a small neighborhood group working to save historical homes from the wrecking ball and to help the Old Sixth Ward avoid gentrification. It worked on a small scale for a handful of years, and when it got seed money to hire its first staff person, the organization found Lawler, a New Jersey native who'd earned an economics degree from Duke University and then a master's in public policy from Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

After working a short time on homeless housing in New York, was lured to Houston and never left. She's been Avenue CDC's executive director since 1996, keeping the same title but growing with the organization.

Avenue CDC

What it is: Building affordable housing and providing vital neighborhood services such as financial literacy, health care and community engagement

Its properties: Avenue Meadows, Avenue Station, Avenue Terrace, Elder Street Artist Lofts (former Jefferson Davis Hospital) Fulton Gardens, Las Brisas and Oak Arbor Townhomes

For information or to donate:avenuecdc.org

Shy and reserved, Lawler doesn't pursue the spotlight, but it manages to find her anyway, each time Avenue CDC and her now 50-person staff mark a big, new success.

In the early 1990s, when new homes were going up all over Montrose, owners and developers would donate original bungalows to Avenue CDC, who'd put them on a truck and move them to lots they bought in the Old Sixth Ward. Workers set them in place, fixed them up and sold them at a reasonable rate, then celebrated one more small success.

Over time, it shifted to new construction, then entire neighborhoods, plus some apartment complexes and mid-rises for seniors who wanted to stay in their neighborhood but couldn't take care of a home any longer. Once land in the Old Sixth Ward got too expensive, they shifted to the Near Northside.

Developers have discovered that area, too, so Avenue CDC has shifted once more, to Northline just outside the 610 Loop, where a three-phase project — Avenue Meadows, in conjunction with the

studioMET design-build firm — is underway.

One of its more recent developments is Avenue Place off Washington, with 95 modest homes, half of which go to low-income residents and half of which are sold at market rate. The first phase sold for about \$150,000 each, and when construction costs rose, the rest went for \$240,000 and up.

In the distance, you can see its sister apartment complex, with 200 units ranging from a \$330 efficiency to a \$1,700-a-month two- to three-bedroom apartment. In all, Avenue CDC has developed some 750 affordable apartment units.

Because land prices and construction costs have increased, the group is also dabbling in modular housing — built in a warehouse to state building code, then brought to a lot, assembled and finished to city building code — with a single small unit going up now in the Northline area by Rame and Russell Hruska's Intexure Architects and their Boxprefab.

Creating affordable housing is one way to help those with low incomes have a decent place to live, but Avenue CDC is about more than that. After Hurricane Harvey, the nonprofit helped residents clean up and repair homes, and in their neighborhoods it promotes grassroots beautification efforts so homeowners can help each other.

A \$12 million capital campaign will fund a new 30,000-square-foot building, Avenue Center, where Lawler's staff can work under one roof, and it can launch a health clinic with Legacy Community Health and an early-childhood education center with the YMCA. Other space will be devoted to classes such as financial literacy and home ownership, topics that reach about 15,000 people a year.

Lawler's team has already raised \$10 million, and the three-story building is under construction across from Moody Park in the Near Northside.

“Affordable housing” and “low-income neighborhoods” are buzz words that can create tension, and when Avenue CDC is ready to launch something, Lawler and her staff and supporters do their homework.

At one civic meeting, Lawler took an Avenue Place homeowner with her to help disprove the stereotypes of who “low-income” people are.

It was Rob Block, who worked at nonprofits — including Avenue CDC — before shifting careers to become a city of Houston firefighter. Before he entered the firefighters' academy, he was making more

than \$40,000 a year, but as a cadet firefighter, his income dropped to \$29,000.

Some of his classmates moved back in with their parents or teamed up to rent apartments together. Another took a second mortgage on his home to support his family until he was off probation and making a better \$44,000-or-more annual salary.

“If I had wanted to buy a house it would have to be in the suburbs, or I would be renting somewhere in the city, and what I could afford probably would not be a very nice place,” said Block, 36 and a firefighter at Station 25 in Third Ward. As a rookie, he worked at Station 12 near his home and could ride his bike to work.

“I’ve talked to neighborhood groups that are concerned about multifamily housing being built. There’s hysteria that if you build apartments, it will end up being housing projects full of crime and will negatively affect the neighborhood,” Block said. “The people who benefit, though, are firefighters and first responders and teachers and community servants. I talk about how it has benefitted me and the whole community to have people like me living in it. I’m not sure it convinces everyone, but it helps people think about it differently.”

John Walsh, a former homebuilder and city housing czar who now runs the real-estate program at the University of Houston’s C.T. Bauer College of Business, has mentored Lawler and supported Avenue CDC in many projects they’ve worked on together over the years. He credits Lawler’s low-key approach for her many successes in a city that brags more about luxury high-rises and over-the-top homes rather than modest, affordable housing.

“‘Communication’ sounds like something that happens in a boardroom. That’s not how Mary works,” Walsh said. “She’s assertive when she needs to be, but she’s never strident. That’s the advantage that Mary has. She has this tremendous leadership ability that’s engaging rather than off-putting.”

And working the maze of local, state and federal funding sources is another strength.

“She’s a master at finding money,” Walsh continued. “She can find public funding and philanthropic funding, and she backs it up with delivered products that are successful. That builds a track record that gets funding ... she’s very, very good at that.”

Bill Baldwin and Fady Armanious have lent their names to a number of fundraisers, from casual events such as the 2018 Arts on the Avenue fundraiser for Avenue CDC to fancy black-tie galas. They helped raise \$250,000 for the nonprofit because it is devoted to making room for everyone.

“In real estate, we tear down a lot of buildings. I can’t make anyone drive a Model T or live in a 1,000-square-foot bungalow ... but we don’t want to lose that housing stock totally,” said Baldwin, owner and broker at Boulevard Realty and a member of the Houston Planning Commission. “Avenue CDC is about creating balance. They’re not against changes in neighborhoods or people moving to affluent neighborhoods, they just say, ‘Can’t we think of everyone?’”

Baldwin said Lawler is a calm and consistent voice in the crowd.

“I’ve seen Mary at meetings for 20 years,” Baldwin said. “I live in Woodland Heights, and whether it’s a Metro meeting or I-45 expansion meeting, wet-dry issues or historic preservation, she’s always in the background, dressed about the same, relatively low key, not leading the brigade but offering a balanced perspective of neighborhood development.”

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