

# Tully: New life at the old Central State Hospital site

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*Columnist Matthew Tully looks at the increasing state of redevelopment at the site of the old Central State Hospital on the Near Westside.*



*(Photo: Matthew Tully)*

If you head out of Downtown on West Washington Street, driving past the Eiteljorg Museum, the White River and the zoo, you'll soon come across an equally beautiful sight.

About two miles away, trucks and a few pieces of yellow construction equipment now buzz about on the site of the former Central State Hospital, a long-ago closed facility that once was officially called the Indiana Hospital for the Insane. The hospital shut down in 1994, and you can now see the beginnings of what many city leaders hope will be a new catalyst for development and investment on the west side.

There have been several significant redevelopment steps taken on the 150-acre site in recent years, but perhaps the biggest yet is now in the works. The construction crews on the site Monday morning were preparing the ground for what will soon be 17 new market-rate, single-family homes. They'll join a charter school, a senior housing complex and 144 low-income apartment units that have been built in recent years. There are also artist studios, banquet facilities and offices in some of the buildings that remain from the site's historic days.

"For so long, this site had fences and gates around it, and the message was: 'Stay out,'" said Derek Naber, a developer with Holladay Properties, hired by the city as the site's master developer. "That's no longer the case. The whole message you see now is that we want people to come in here."

From Washington Street, the site almost looks like a park, with beautiful mature trees and acres of green space. Developers have worked to attract a neighborhood-based soccer league and many students walk from the apartments to the Christel House Academy West every school day. There's an urban farm on a corner of the site and horses occupy the IMPD Horse Patrol barn; there is talk of replacing it with a new, bigger facility.

"It really has both a rural and urban feel," Naber said of the site. "It's connecting the city with nature."

Debates raged for years about what to do with a huge, long-unused chunk of land that came with [a particularly colorful history](https://www.indystar.com/story/news/2015/10/13/central-state-time-capsule-offers-glimpse-indianas-past/73829236/). The goal now, Naber and others say, is to create "an urban village" on the city-owned property. Backers hope the new housing will help spur more retail along Washington Street, where occasional empty buildings mix with used-car lots and a thriving set of Hispanic-based restaurants and businesses.

So far, seven of the 17 houses have been sold; construction should conclude by fall. It's easy to see why the homes sold. The site is close to Downtown, features a view of the Indianapolis skyline and new homes in the area are almost impossible to find.

"What you see in so many urban neighborhoods right now is that there is so much demand for housing like this, but so little supply," said Micah Hill with Compendium Group, who is overseeing the sale of the homes.

Taylor Schaffer, Mayor Joe Hogsett's press secretary, said the development is "the best case scenario for what we've been talking about as far as investing in neighborhoods and pushing the success of Downtown out to surrounding areas." The site's inclusion of market-rate, subsidized and senior housing, along with commercial and green space, is what the area needs to both create a neighborhood feel and spark other development. Dozens of undeveloped acres remain on the site.

In recent years, the city invested in infrastructure on parts of the site and a deal allows new tax dollars generated to be poured back into development. The new homes, marketed as [The Villages of Central State](https://www.livecentralstate.com/), will sell in the low \$200,000 range.

"We see this as a sign that the Near Westside is coming back," Naber said, referring to the quick sell of seven homes at full market rates. And while I know his job is to talk up the development, I couldn't disagree.

For years, a drive along West Washington took you past the empty and decaying grounds of the former hospital, a symbol of the area's hard times. There is still a long way to go. But these days, that same drive offers something else: Signs of hope.

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