

A Revival for Luxury Park Ridge Town Houses

New builder to resume construction where Nixon once lived.

By RACHELLE GARBARINE

WHEN Bear's Nest went into construction here at the dawn of the mid-80's building boom, the 182-unit luxury town house community seemed like a sure winner.

Its Tudor-style units, which were designed by Eleanor Petterson, a student of Frank Lloyd Wright, sit on a 46-acre parcel in the northern Bergen County community of Park Ridge. It even attracted former President Richard M. Nixon who lived there from 1991 until he died in 1994.

But 12 years and three owners later the project is less than half complete. When construction halted 18 months ago 70 units had been built and sold; 6 more were being developed, most of them under contract to be sold.

Now Bear's Nest is about to begin its latest chapter in the hands of a new owner. Pinnacle Communities Ltd. of Short Hills has contracted to buy the property and expects to restart construction, contingent on receiving approvals, by the middle of this year, said Brian M. Stolar, a company principal. The seller is Citizens First Bank, which has been acquired by NatWest. The bank took back the property in lieu of foreclosure when the earlier owner defaulted on his loan.

Pinnacle's plan as now envisioned is to complete the remaining 106 approved units and add up to 49 more on two adjacent parcels totaling 42 acres. The new units will have the same Tudor exteriors of the originals, but their interiors will be modified.

Prices are expected to start at \$400,000 to \$650,000. The earlier units sold on average for \$450,000 to \$800,000 with a few selling at \$1 million. And according to the Bergen County Multiple Listing Service the average sales price of the 10 units resold at Bear's Nest last year was \$501,000. (Former President Nixon's home sold last September for \$775,000; it was listed at \$1.2 million.)

Mr. Stolar said his company got involved with Bear's Nest over a year ago because "the project has upside potential and the market for luxury town houses that provide quality and value is stronger now than in the supposed boom times."

Nicholas W. Minoia, another principal, added: "It also is a perfect fit for the

PARK RIDGE



Dish Prans/The New York Times

Brian M. Stolar (left) and Nicholas W. Minoia of Pinnacle Communities, at Bear's Nest in Park Ridge.

company." In the last 11 years Pinnacle has taken over five failed luxury town-house developments in the state with a total of 1,056 units and has moved or is moving them to completion.

NatWest will provide financing for a substantial part of the cost of acquiring Bear's Nest, which is said to be about \$12 million. The rest will come from the company's own equity. The principals said they would invest their own money to start the project, to be developed in phases over the next two and a half to three years.

Industry analysts say that among the project's early problems was the slow construction schedule followed by the first development team, comprising Dynasty Builders of Upper Saddle River and Bear's Nest Associates of Montvale. The philosophy then was to offer a certain degree of custom designing.

Other problems were that in the mid-80's Park Ridge was an untested market for luxury town houses and did not have the

cachet of other northern Bergen communities like Saddle River or Franklin Lakes.

With 16 units built by mid-1986, Bear's Nest Associates, dissatisfied with the pace of construction, bought out Dynasty's interest and proceeded alone. The building slowdown and recession also plagued the project.

PINNACLE spent most of last year negotiating with the bank, condominium board and a separate homeowners' group over how the project should proceed. The latter, made up of some residents, had filed a lawsuit to insure that any new plan be consistent with the original plan's quality, design and size. A settlement was reached last fall.

Under it the bank finished the six incomplete units and assembled the adjacent sites, to be developed by Pinnacle as part of Bear's Nest.

And Pinnacle agreed to maintain the project's architectural design. (Indeed, it

has retained Ms. Petterson, the original architect.) It also agreed to add more recreational amenities to serve the increased number of units.

Robert D. Winston, a five-year resident and vice president of the homeowners' group, said of the settlement: "It will keep the project's integrity and value intact and insure our investment."

Pinnacle must now meet municipal concerns. Richard Mancinelli, the Mayor of Park Ridge, said that among other things Pinnacle must dig another well to accommodate the expanding project and help improve Spring Valley Road, a county thoroughfare that fronts the project.

He also noted that 32 of the 42 acres that Pinnacle will soon acquire for Bear's Nest are zoned for high-density housing, with some units reserved for low- and moderate-income residents. If the developer builds luxury town houses on that property, he said, it must compensate the borough for the loss of those lower-income units.

(Under the State Supreme Court's Mount Laurel doctrines, all municipalities are required to provide housing opportunities for lower-income families. In addition, towns are barred from exclusionary zoning.)

Mayor Mancinelli said that completing the expanded project would increase the borough's ratable base by up to \$70 million and generate about \$2 million more in new tax revenue annually. "But the bottom line," he added, "is that until these issues are resolved there will be no approvals."

In response, Mr. Minoia, the Pinnacle principal, said: "We are confident an equitable financial agreement will be reached among the parties in the near future." Sales are expected to open by late summer.

DESPITE the project's history of fits and starts, industry analysts and local realtors said that it had established the luxury town house market in Park Ridge at a time when that market in northern Bergen County was tightening. Indeed, of the half dozen or so projects comparable to Bear's Nest all are, or soon will, be completed and sold out, they note.

"The market has leveled out," said Naomi B. Friedman, who runs a real estate company bearing her name in Saddle River, specializing in luxury town houses. "Units realistically priced to reflect today's market will sell." She added that there was a backlog of buyers, especially empty-nesters, for such housing in that part of the county where the supply is thinning and new construction is limited.

Pinnacle is modifying the interiors of the four-level units to appeal to prosperous empty nesters and professional couples. While the earlier ones were for the most part 2,657 to 4,346 square feet in size, the space was organized vertically. That meant buyers needed to negotiate steps or opt for an elevator, which at times was a standard or optional feature.

The new units will be widened by 10 feet to 30 feet to create 20 to 25 percent more living area on the first and second levels, for a total of 2,500 to 3,500 square feet. Some 1,500 additional square feet are included in the basement and fourth level, which can be finished at an extra cost. All the units will have three or four bedrooms, with the master bedroom on the first level in most models. They will also have dens and two-car garages.

Bear's Nest now has a swimming pool and a clubhouse. To accommodate the expanded community Pinnacle plans to build four tennis courts, a second pool, a cabana, a putting green and walking/jogging paths.

Mayor Mancinelli and Mr. Winston of the homeowners' group said they were hopeful that this would be the final chapter in the project's development. ■