Labor of Love

George Jenne's companies are remodeling homes on Delphine Street. The homes will be rented to low-income seniors.

Businessman George Jenne restores Delphine St. homes for elderly poor

By AMY WOLD

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With $4 million in tax credits and a love of historic homes, businessman George Jenne is restoring the feel and function of older residential neighborhoods for low-income seniors.

Working on old homes is a labor of love, Jenne said.

"Some years ago I restored a plantation house in southwest Mississippi using historic tax credits," he said. Tax credits are federal subsidies to encourage development. The low-income tax credit program was enacted by Congress in 1986 to encourage new construction and rehabilitation of rental housing.

After the Mississippi project, Jenne turned his attention to downtown Baton Rouge. During a renovation of three houses in the 500 block of Spanish Town Road, Jenne said someone mentioned that he should look into low-income tax credits. He applied for the money a year ago and started renovations in May.

"I just love the old neighborhoods and old houses and I think they have so much potential," he said.

Jenne's companies Restoration Baton Rouge 1 and Restoration Baton Rouge 2 purchased 69 units in 42 buildings from J.T. Doiron, Inc. The homes are located in several neighborhoods including homes along Delphine Street, in the neighborhood of 30th and Progress streets and duplexes near the intersection of Lavinia and Cork streets.
Jenne's company George Jenne Contractor is the developer in the project. "These were pretty scary. These were in the falling down category," he said about the homes along Delphine Street.

Although the shells are kept as an original blueprint, everything else in the homes is being replaced.

"They're virtually new buildings," Jenne said. "Hopefully, we're able to create a sense of community."

His only addition is building a front porch on homes that have traditionally just had brick or cement steps.

"It's been my experience that these older folks, I don't care if it's 105 degrees, they like to sit on the front porch," he said.

Rents of the remodeled homes have to be $55 or older and qualify as low income through a federal formula.

"I think it's a wonderful opportunity that you can do something for your city and provide a good living accommodation for people who really need it at an affordable price," the homes will rent for $335 a month.

Perry Franklin, executive director of the Mid City Redevelopment Alliance, Inc., commended Jenne for his commitment to taking on the extensive tax credit paperwork and procedures to help renovate these old homes. Jenne is also a board member of Mid City Redevelopment Alliance, a non-profit organization involved with housing and lifestyle improvements.

"The project has returned to commerce, housing that was being underused. They're probably in better condition than when they were first built," Franklin said.

Although the rent used to be $150 and will now be $335, Franklin said that doesn't mean that the homes are out of the reach for low-income elderly.

"They should have been renting them for $50, because they were worth nothing," Franklin said. "People are willing to pay for quality housing."

All of the homes were purchased from J.T. Doiron, the company that managed the rental properties for years. The company will continue to manage the rentals after the renovations are completed.

Property Manager Michael Doiron said renovation work on the homes was done in 1985 and 1990, but renters were tough on the houses.

"It was just getting too costly to rehabilitate a home again and again," Doiron said. "They were livable. They were habitable. They were what I call rustic.... They were at that stage in their life that they needed to be rehabilitated again."

Although Doiron said he could have applied for the tax credits, he said it was too much paperwork to stay on top of while managing their 800 rental properties. In addition, he said, he couldn't afford to put a lot of money into these 69 properties because it would have drained resources from all the other properties. Doiron said that since the program requires renters to be low-income senior citizens, the tenants will be more responsible, which means rehabilitation can go back to a more standard rotation.

"It's always been a cool street (Delphine), good location on the bus lines," Doiron said. "When he (Jenne) bought 69 houses from us, we only had eight vacant."

Jenne said he applied for two more projects for 2002 that would include redevelopment and new construction of rental and rent-to-own homes.

For more information about applying to rent the homes for low-income seniors, call J.T. Doiron at 225-343-5721.