

JACK KEMP

WORKFORCE HOUSING

MODELS OF

EXCELLENCE

AWARDS

2013 WINNER

DEVELOPER

Mason Housing Inc.

DEVELOPMENT TEAM

- George Mason University
- JFW Consulting
- Studley B&D
- Torti Gallas & Partners, Inc.

MIXTURE OF HOUSING TYPES

Workforce units: 156

AFFORDABILITY

Workforce rental units priced as follows:

1 BR: \$1,424-\$1,456/month

2BR: \$1,735-\$1,959/month

3BR: \$2,142-\$2,297/month

DEVELOPMENT COSTS

\$39.8 Million

DEVELOPMENT TIMELINE

Site Acquired: November 2007

Construction Started: November 2008

Completed: April 2010

WEBSITE

www.masonvale.com



Masonvale

Fairfax, Virginia

Masonvale is an employer-assisted housing development of 156 workforce rental units on the eastern edge of the George Mason University (GMU) campus in Fairfax County, Virginia, a suburb of Washington, DC. Located in a region known for its high cost of living, the university considered how to address its need for workforce housing options. GMU donated land for the development of Masonvale, which provides conveniently-located, high-quality housing at below-market rents. Units are limited to faculty, staff, and full-time graduate students at GMU and employees of the City of Fairfax and Fairfax County, with priority for new faculty.

In the late 1990s, George Mason University leadership identified a need for workforce housing on or near its main campus. GMU is a public university with a total of 6,133 faculty and staff; a student enrollment of over 20,000 undergraduates; and a suburban main campus spreading over 817 acres. In the face of the area's expensive housing, the university found itself at a distinct disadvantage in attracting junior faculty and qualified staff to the Fairfax campus.

Beginning in 2005, GMU solicited a development team to explore workforce housing options. With a significant portfolio of land near the Fairfax campus, the university considered how to best leverage this asset. Masonvale was developed out of a unique public/private partnership between the public university and the development team where GMU's sole contribution was the land. Mason Housing, Inc., is a nonprofit entity that was established to develop and manage the new community.

GMU entered into a long-term ground lease with Mason Housing, Inc. for a one dollar plus any participation rent, defined as any net cash flow less principal and interest payments and funding of project reserves derived from the project.

Through its relationship with GMU, Mason Housing, Inc. was able to secure \$39.8 million in tax-exempt bond financing through the Fairfax County Economic Development Authority. Achieving 100 percent financing with variable-rate tax-exempt bonds facilitated the financing of the project. Interest rate swaps with the bank secured a 5.20 percent fixed-rate loan.

The partnership between the university and development entity is ongoing. The university plays an active role in the community, but Masonvale is overseen by the separate nonprofit organization of Mason Housing, Inc. The nonprofit's board of directors is comprised of seven community representatives, three of whom have direct ties to GMU.

Occupying 11.3 acres in a cluster design on 27 acres, the site is defined by two protected riparian valleys. The ENERGY STAR-certified units consist of one and two-bedroom stacked flats, two- and three-bedroom townhomes, and duplexes. There are 40 one-bedroom units ranging from 617 to 679 square feet; 60 two-bedroom units ranging from 892 to 1,038 square feet; and 57 three-bedroom units ranging from 1,469 to 1,329 square feet, with and without garages. The homes are offered to eligible residents at rents that average 5-15 percent below market value. This pricing makes the units affordable to families earning 70-90 percent AMI, depending on unit type.

By virtue of the ground lease agreement with GMU, Mason Housing, Inc. is obligated to maintain the long-term affordability of the units, and revises rental rates annually after reviewing current market conditions. There is a waitlist for Masonvale, with faculty and staff receiving priority. Leases are renewable for a maximum of three years. Families with children make up about 40 percent of the Masonvale community and 20 percent of Masonvale residents are graduate students.

The townhouse and single family detached properties contain individual unit entries with modest amounts of private open space such as yards, porches, and decks. The use of stacked units helps increase the density while maintaining the overall townhouse character of the neighborhood.

Known for its placemaking approach to development, Torti Gallas and Partners designed Masonvale as a complete neighborhood. Particularly notable for this project are the careful attention to high-end design features and distinct architectural character on colonial and craftsman styles—while still keeping development costs low. Brick homes frame the gateway to the project from the main campus, and also define the neighborhood green, while more modest colonial homes radiate out from this brick center. Within this production housing, the substantial look and feel of details such as columns, trim, window and door surrounds were deliberate design decisions. The development team was able to stay within budget with construction costs of \$95/square foot while maintaining these design standards. The project has been recognized with several national design awards.

“GMU has always had a faculty and staff housing need, but this was their first effort to meet it themselves instead of relying on the market to provide it. The university rightly acknowledged that high local housing costs were impacting their ability to recruit and retain junior faculty.”

Murphy Antoine
Principal
Torti Gallas and Partners, Inc.

Proximity to the main campus means that faculty and staff living in Masonvale can bike or walk to work. In addition, a variety of social and civic events on campus are easily accessible by foot to residents. The pedestrian-friendly streets and residents' common affiliation with GMU create strong sense of community. In a region where traffic congestion and long commutes are typical, Masonvale's convenient on-campus location—offering a short bike ride or walk to work—is another major attraction.

Masonvale offers an excellent example of employer-assisted housing. GMU contributed the land for the development of attractive neighborhood with 100 percent workforce units, without any public subsidy or regulation. With no initial or ongoing financial contribution, GMU was able to leverage their land asset to create a successful project and fill an urgent need for employee housing.

