

Success or failure? The new face of New Orleans public housing

by Maya Rodriguez / Eyewitness News

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NEW ORLEANS - It was a vote in 2007 that would potentially change the face of public housing in New Orleans forever.

As the New Orleans City Council unanimously moved to allow the demolition of several of the city's major public housing complexes, chaos erupted both inside and outside the chambers.

"The day that the City Council had to make the final decision about what would happen with the "Big Four" was one of the saddest days with the City of New Orleans," said James Perry, director of the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center.

Nearly three years after that vote, the sounds of frustration from that day have faded and, over time, have been replaced by the sounds of demolition and construction. Redevelopment is now well-underway at the "Big Four" complexes of Lafitte, St. Bernard, C.J. Peete and B.W. Cooper.

Today, the sites are now in various stages of construction and occupancy. The redevelopment called for the complexes to be replaced with new, mixed-income communities. It is a combination that seeks to integrate the developments based on economics.

It generally follows this equation:

- One-third of the units are public housing
- One-third are affordable, for the individuals making between 60-80 percent of the area median income (AMI)
- One-third are regular, market-rate units

Whether anyone would actually pay market-rate rents to live in a development where public housing once stood remained a big question. Yet, New Orleans already had one example, which was built several years before the council's vote.

"What was here was your typical brick housing development called the St. Thomas, and there were 1,500 housing units and about 100 buildings," said Pres Kabacoff, CEO of HRI Properties and the developer behind River Garden, a mixed-income community that replaced the former St. Thomas public housing complex. "For the most part, we changed the nature of this development and we have mixed-income."

The numbers show River Garden is between 80 and 95 percent occupied at all income levels. Kabacoff points out, the River Garden development works because its location-- in the Lower Garden District-- is part of the attraction.

However, the Big Four complexes were in very different areas of city, like the former St. Bernard development, re-named Columbia Parc.

"We've got a waiting list at all levels," said Gerry Barousse, head of the Bayou District Foundation, part of the Columbia Parc development.

The foundation is now working to establish an early education center, schools and shops in and around the site.

"We're building luxury apartments that are available to residents of all income and trying to build a community back, not just build housing," Barousse said.

One of the market-rate renters there is Abraham Walker. He and his wife moved from Mid-City to Columbia Parc seven months ago, when they had their second child.

"You hear so much in media about Section 8 and public assistance and how the people react and I guess we didn't know if that would rub off on us or rub off on my children," he said.

Turns out, Walker said there has been an unexpected reaction to his family's move into the development.

"I mean, I'm not making myself out to be a super hero or something like that," he said, "but I can see some of the kids trying to speak to us, or they change the way they're doing things just when we walk up. It's almost like we're the police-- but we're not."

It is a personal ripple effect that could very well extend beyond the development's streets.

Monika McKay signed on to get Columbia Parc up and running. She had no doubts that the development, which is based on one in Atlanta, would work in New Orleans.

"We look at Magazine Street, or any block off of St. Charles-- I'm from Uptown-- so, we've always had mixed income," she said.

While the redevelopments so far appear to be attracting market-rate tenants, the question of what happened to former public housing residents is still a concern for some.

"So, the result was, a lot of folks felt like this thing was being shoved down their necks," said Perry, the affordable housing advocate.

Perry said the controversy surrounding the redevelopments arose from fears that former public housing residents would not be able to return.

In a sense, that was true: the sites have been redeveloped with fewer units and less density. When you add in the market-rate and affordable renters, the number of public housing units on the sites becomes a fraction of what there once was.

"We have to enter into the redevelopment of public housing as a community to ensure that we are supporting every single person in the community-- rich and poor, black and white, every person," Perry said.

David Gilmore is the administrative receiver for the Housing Authority of New Orleans. He was brought in by HUD a year ago, to turn around the troubled housing authority.

"No one should be surprised, and ultimately, disappointed," he said.

Gilmore said all of the public housing residents were relocated, in part, through the use of Section 8 vouchers. He said the agency has nearly tripled the number of rental units where those vouchers can be used in the city.

"Is it enough? No. But it's certainly a significant growth in that area," Gilmore said.

What is a major improvement, according to Gilmore, are the developments themselves. They now include parks and playgrounds, gyms and swimming pools-- even a mini-movie theater, in one case. He said those improvements are more than just amenities.

"They send a message to people and the message is: "You're life is valuable. You're living is important, that you are important to us and it doesn't matter whether you're living on a very, very low-income or whether you're a market-rate individual-- that's not the issue that separates you. It's what's the best environment that you can raise your family," he said.

As for whether the redevelopments will eventually live up to their full potential as mixed-income communities, the answer may not be clear for some time.

"I think it's really still too early to tell for any of the developments, whether or not they are a success," Perry said. "But time will tell us, frankly."

In addition to the rental units, the redevelopments also include plans for the construction of homes that will go up for sale.