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Northwest Georgia Housing Authority changes with the times

By Doug Walker
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The face of public housing has changed dramatically in Rome over the last decade.

Gone are the overcrowded, cramped developments like Hight Homes, replaced by a modern shopping center anchored by a Publix.

Gone is the Fairgrounds complex in North Rome, soon to be replaced by a gated community of single-family and duplex homes.

And gone is the Altoview Terrace complex at Spring Creek and East 14th streets in East Rome.

The **Northwest Georgia Housing Authority** hopes to replace Altoview with a major development that will extend from the Maple Street corridor in East Rome to East 12th Street and East Main Street in South Rome.

It's part of the Housing Authority's move toward seeding mixed-income neighborhoods as the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development shifts funding away from low-income government "projects."

In the early 20th century — going back to the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt — the philosophy was that private developers had no interest in constructing quality housing for people with low incomes.

By the time of Lyndon Johnson's administration in the 1960s, the idea of subsidizing rent with vouchers became a more popular concept.

Howard Husock, in a 2009 article written for the libertarian Cato Institute, suggested that vouchers would lead to an end of "concentrated poverty."

Husock said federal housing efforts through the years had actually served to undermine neighborhoods. "(T)hey encourage dependency, and they do not create incentives for long-term maintenance and improvements," he wrote.

The 1998 Faircloth Amendment to the U.S. Housing Act of 1937 basically stipulated that HUD couldn't fund construction or operating assistance for any new public housing units that would result in an increase in the number of units in operation as of Oct. 1, 1999.

HUD money drying up

The Northwest Georgia Housing Authority, which oversees public housing in Rome and Rockmart, is seeking to become what amounts to a private developer of housing for people with low to moderate incomes.

Some of that is out of necessity.

Lee Hight, chairwoman of the NWGHA, said HUD does allocate money to replace demolished housing such as

Hight Homes, Fairgrounds and Altoview Terrace — but offers little for repairs and maintenance.

“They are not giving anybody money like they used to,” Hight said. “When you start fixing something it actually costs you more than to start over.”

In fact, HUD estimates that the need for repairs nationally is roughly 10 to 15 times the amount of money available. And there is no money for the construction of additional new housing.

Locally, the need for new development is evidenced by a couple of waiting lists maintained by the Housing Authority.

One list is for space in public housing — the high-rise apartments of North Fifth Avenue, for example. Another wait list exists for Section 8 vouchers, which subsidize rent payments to private landlords.

NWGHA Executive Director Sandra Hudson said that, in the last several years, her office has been receiving more applications for housing help than ever before. The wait lists for public housing and Section 8 vouchers now have close to 3,000 names.

“People are calling me every day saying, ‘Ms. Hudson what can I do? I’m homeless, where can I go?’” she said.

More than a year ago, the Housing Authority partnered with the owners of the Ashland Park Apartments, which overlook the intersection of Veterans Memorial Highway and Ga. 53 in North Rome.

The partnership with Vantage Development is allowing the Authority to get some tax-credit housing management experience, which is something that HUD and the Georgia Department of Community Affairs require before the agency can become a developer.

The two groups are working on what's known as a Rental Assistance Demonstration project that will involve the complete overhaul of more than 90 duplex homes in the Willingham Village neighborhood off Division Street in West Rome.

Hight said some housing authorities have not had the best experience with the RAD program because private developers come in, get their tax credits, make money and then pull out.

"Fortunately, we've found a group that we're happy with," she said.

Long-range vision

Hight said if the Housing Authority gets the necessary tax-credit experience, the Authority could become its own developer.

"That way we make our own money, do everything ourselves, under our own umbrella," Hight said.

By getting involved in tax-credit development, Hudson said, the Housing Authority would be eligible to receive development fees that would be used to bolster its other programs.

"That would allow the money to continue to purchase single-family homes to rent out as affordable housing for people across the community," Hudson said.

Creating a revenue stream as a developer is significant because the NWGHA is extremely proud of the new housing stock that has been created in recent years.

Two side-by-side developments along Division Street — the environmentally efficient 10-unit Village Green complex and the 27-unit Willingham at Division apartments — don't fit the traditional image of public housing.

"Low-income folks need adequate, decent housing in Rome," Hight said.

She said the NWGHA is trying to be a good steward of the money it gets from the federal and state governments while at the same time doing right by the citizens of Rome.

"It's not going to happen overnight," Hight said.

The NWGHA board of directors did have some difficult initial negotiations with Vantage related to the quality specifications for the Willingham Village project.

"If you put up something cheap, you end up with something cheap, and you wind up replacing and replacing," Hight said.

She said when tenants have quality housing they tend to care more about maintaining it.

“We haven’t had to replace anything in our new units,” she said. “Just because someone has low income doesn’t mean they should not have something that’s nice.”

Hight makes it very clear that the authority is not trying to put itself in a position where it is trying to compete with other private housing developers.

“This is strictly public housing,” she said.

Husock argued in his 2009 paper that it’s wrong to think it’s important to provide better housing to all who claim need. It is “the effort to achieve the better home, not the home itself, that is the real engine of social improvement,” he wrote.

Hight said that is not what the housing authority is doing by constructing nicer homes for those with low incomes. The tenants there, she said, are putting forth efforts to achieve.

“People who are living out in those units on Division Street are paying \$500 to \$600 a month for rent. They are going to school, to jobs and are trying to better themselves,” Hight said.