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Article published May 8, 2008

Sweet destruction

Demolition of public housing complex is the start of something better

It is not so hard to tear down a building. The tough part is the next step: constructing something better in its place.

This thought came to mind Wednesday morning as a bulldozer tore into a wall of the Janie Poe public housing complex.

The long-awaited, ceremonial "crunch" kicks off a multiphase redevelopment project that will replace nearly 400 blighted, north Sarasota public housing units with 800 new, mixed-income homes and rentals.

Rarely has destruction been so welcome. This day, so long in coming, is the start of a better community -- if the demolition is followed up with steady support and good management. We hope and believe that it will be.

In attendance Wednesday was a large crowd of housing advocates, public officials, specialists and residents. Without their hard work, leadership and cooperation, redevelopment would have remained the impossible dream it always seemed to be in the past.

The dilapidated units had fallen prey to time, funding shortages and mismanagement. Several attempts to secure revitalization grants failed.

In 2005, federal housing experts were brought in to turn things around. Their skills, combined with input from public housing residents and attention from local governments and caring community members, transformed bitter failure into forward momentum.

Reconstruction will bring jobs, stronger neighborhoods and new housing opportunities -- at a time when the economy really needs a boost.

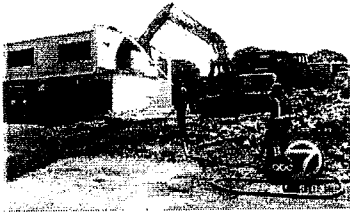
It was a very good day. When the reconstruction is complete and residents can move in, it will be an even better one.

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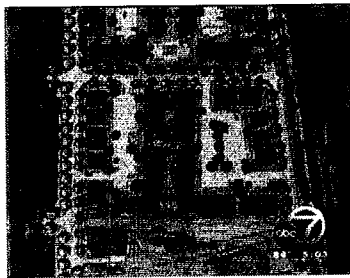
Demolition begins to clear way for new housing project

Updated: May 7, 2008 05:26 PM EDT



SARASOTA COUNTY - If you're driving through Newtown, you may notice it's a bit bare near Central and 22nd Avenue. Crews are demolishing an old public housing development.

They started tearing down Janie Poe Wednesday. City leaders hope it will revitalize a part of Sarasota, but it may take more than a wrecking ball to do it.



A few cranes...a giant claw....and a scoop of dirt. And now the Janie Poe Revitalization Project is underway. As crews went to work demolishing the apartments, known for 37-years as the Janie Poe Housing Authority, residents and officials cheered for a new beginning. "We hope that it will spur some revitalization here in Newtown, not just on our 48-acres, which is what we're planning, but throughout Newtown."

Even the mayor stepped in, testing out the crane to make sure everything was working okay.

Just a few years ago, The Housing Authority remodeled the apartments, but that wasn't enough. Now they're trying to do more. Before demolition began, residents said Janie Poe wasn't suitable to live in, saying it was overrun by insects and a safety hazard. "Janie Poe had become distressed, filled with neglect, roach infested, it just wasn't safe," says Valerie Buchand, president of the Janie Poe Resident Council.

And while the city is working to rebuild Janie Poe on one side of the fence, on the other side, residents are still living in old buildings.

The Executive Director of Sarasota Housing Authority says they will rebuild those units as soon as money is available. "If we get funded, we will start the second phase of relocation for the remaining 72 families. That will probably start around the first of 2009."

While many residents are happy with the start of what seems to be a new beginning in the area, some say there's still more work to be done. "It's going to take more than bricks and mortar to revitalize Newtown."

And residents say revitalization will happen when the community and the officials come together for one specific purpose. "It should be about people, not politician's agendas, but about the people."

The new housing units will be available for residents in October of 2009. The Housing Authority expects to hear from the state this summer on whether they will pay to demolish the remaining units.

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[Back](#)

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Old public housing makes way for new



More than 250 new units are planned at the Janie Poe public housing complex in Sarasota. COURTESY RENDERING / TORTI GALLAS AND

SARASOTA In a ceremonial groundbreaking Wednesday, crews began to tear down the first building in the redevelopment of Sarasota's four public housing complexes.

There will be dust and construction equipment for the next eight years as a New Jersey construction company demolishes old apartments and puts up more than 250 new units. The contractor plans to finish construction of the first 86 rental units by October 2009.

Tamara Werbelow will be watching the project with interest.

Werbelow is one of more than 50 residents who had to move from their Janie Poe apartments five months ago, switching to another public housing apartment a few blocks away. She hopes to be one of the first to apply to move into the new apartments -- which will have the Internet in every unit, a community center, playground and library.

"I hope I can get a spot," Werbelow said Wednesday, minutes after a backhoe took the first swing at the old building at 25th Street and Central Avenue.

"To have a nice place to stay and be stable -- finally. That is what I shoot for every day, something stable."

Before crews finish construction, the Sarasota County Housing Authority will contact residents who were moved out of the old apartments.

New Jersey-based developer Michael's Development plans to redevelop Janie Poe in three phases. The company is contracted to redevelop three other nearby public housing apartments.

In the \$16 million first phase of the redevelopment project, 52 units will be demolished to make room for 20 public housing units, another 40 affordable units for families earning less than \$32,400 a year (for a family of four), and 20 units that will be rented at market price.

Valerie Buchand, president of the Janie Poe Resident Association, said the biggest challenge is making sure the other phases of construction break ground on time.

"We need to make sure we don't sway from the promise we made," Buchand said.
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