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SARASOTA'S PUBLIC HOUSING

A turning point at Janie Poe

Ribbon-cuttings and groundbreaking have always struck me as a tad phony. The oversized scissors that can't really cut anything; the shiny new shovels that have never touched a speck of dirt -- these cardboard occasions seem as hammy as an Ed Wood movie.

Then came Wednesday's bulldozing ceremony at the Janie Poe public housing complex in north Sarasota. Attending, I had to admit that this one was the real deal -- a genuine reason to celebrate.

Normally I wouldn't wax enthusiastic about the demolition of low-income housing units. There are too few of them already. But at Janie Poe, it signaled the beginning of a redevelopment project that at one time seemed hopeless.

Blighted units will make way for new housing that serves a mix of incomes, including low and extremely low. Funded with public and private dollars, the endeavor will create jobs and a fresh start for families. It will also aid the revitalization of beleaguered northside neighborhoods.

Many challenges lie ahead to complete this work. But Wednesday marked a positive turning point at a time when we could all use some good news. You've seen the headlines: War and typhoons abroad; a stumbling economy at home; a flood of mortgage foreclosures; a wave of tax reform that is forcing governments to throw personnel and services overboard.

Amid all this turmoil, people somehow found a way to come together and do what is necessary to redevelop Janie Poe -- a solution that had eluded them for decades.

When the federal Housing and Urban Development Department assumed control of Sarasota's troubled Housing Authority three years ago (an arrangement that will soon revert back to the city), I did a little snooping in the Herald-Tribune archives. I was looking for historical perspective.

The yellowed clips from the 1970s, '80s and '90s revealed a housing authority often in distress. It was beset both internally (poor management, lack of funding) and externally (crime, poverty, racial tension). Further hampering the situation was the hybrid power structure: The federal government controlled the purse strings and set the rules, but a city-appointed board (often inexperienced) oversaw the local authority. It was a case of too many hands and not enough accountability.

One drawback in particular stood out: The city's political establishment treated public housing as a liability, not an asset.

Elected leaders in those days were, in some cases, philosophically opposed to subsidizing poor

people, especially with local taxes. Others objected to the financial drain as the authority continually fell behind on its city utility bills.

Today, some taxpayers still share those views. But the prevailing winds have shifted, due to three major changes:

Sarasota developed a conscience over the poor state of public housing. Everyday citizens took notice. They got involved, engaged the residents and advocated on their behalf. What spurred them, in many cases, was the documentary "Condemned," which highlighted Janie Poe's mold, plumbing and bug problems.

Management changed for the better. Experienced, can-do administrators came in with HUD receiver Carmen Valenti (who retired earlier this year) and Bill Russell. They improved conditions, earned the trust of residents and built momentum for redevelopment, overcoming the legacy of disappointment left by previous administrations.

Elected leaders, from former Congresswoman Katherine Harris on down to city and county commissioners, saw the writing on the wall. They began to realize that work-force housing -- including public housing -- is an asset worth preserving. Neglecting it is the real liability.

Positive though Sarasota's public housing turnaround is, it's unlikely to change the mind-set of ideologues who think government subsidies are the problem, not the solution. And, to be sure, there are still ways in which the Janie Poe redevelopment could disappoint. It is a very large construction project, after all, requiring the cooperation of the housing authority, planners, market timing, financiers and contractors. Current residents will have to deal with displacement -- temporary, I hope -- and learn to become more self-sufficient.

To work, it will need good luck and maybe even divine intervention -- which could explain why so many of the VIPs at Wednesday's ceremony thanked God for the progress made so far.

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