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Start of something big

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In place **of** old, shabby, uncomfortable -- even unhealthy -- public housing, imagine a neighborhood that revitalizes Newtown with new homes that serve low-income families and the work force.

That ideal has often eluded Sarasota's grasp. The history **of** failure seems to be changing, however: Last week, the Housing Authority signed a redevelopment contract with a firm that aims to transform 388 dilapidated units into about 850 new ones -- mostly affordable to folks on the lower (but not always the lowest) end **of** the pay scale. The contract is a milestone, but it's only the **start of** a long endeavor that involves public and private investment. If the redevelopment goals are to be reached, local governments must commit money and infrastructure. Housing officials say that \$8 million to \$10 million in assistance from the city and county would help ensure success.

That's **big** money. But what's really huge is the opportunity to address two major community goals: affordable housing and Newtown's economic revival. These are worth a significant infusion **of** local money, such as revenue from an expanded tax-increment finance district now awaiting county approval.

Tax credits and federal money also will be involved in the redevelopment, though these dollars flow less freely than they once did for public housing.

That's a trend that Congress should reverse, because the funds are vital in keeping rents in redeveloped projects low enough to serve not just the poor but the extremely poor -- the people now living in dilapidated public housing.

The Housing Authority is trying to avoid displacing them. The community should help it succeed.

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