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A public housing comeback

Sarasota board's swearing-in caps a brief but eventful journey

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This week, in what was no ordinary ceremony, seven citizens were sworn in as the reconstituted Sarasota Housing Authority board.

To fully appreciate that milestone, consider the past 31/2 years.

It is early 2005 and real estate is skyrocketing, but not for the authority. Its nearly 400 low-income, subsidized apartments -- precious assets as the boom triggers an affordable housing crisis -- are in bad shape. So are the agency's finances. Hopes for a redevelopment grant have failed. Tenants and management are at loggerheads.

When the overwhelmed authority refuses to sign a self-improvement mandate from the U.S. Housing and Urban Development department, patience runs out: The director quits and city commissioners invite HUD to take over the whole mess.

It's a gamble. The vast HUD, after all, has racked up its own notable failures over the years, and funding is squeezed. The Herald-Tribune Editorial Board is skeptical about a takeover that comes with no additional money.

It is 2006, and the gamble begins to pay off. Steadily, problems are addressed by HUD-appointed leaders. The maintenance backlog is tackled and the broken relationship between management and tenants is rebuilt. Audit scores improve. Volunteers, often retirees, from the Sarasota community champion the cause of public housing, and the attention makes a vital difference.

It is 2007. With a developer hired, a redevelopment plan gains credibility. Millions of dollars from local coffers are committed to help fund a new, mixed-income project. The agency beats stiff competition to win important tax credits. Meanwhile, a seven-member team of local volunteers is appointed and trained for their future role as a new housing board.

It is 2008. Numerous low-income families have been relocated -- with guaranteed rent vouchers -- so demolition can commence on the most notorious of Sarasota's public housing: the Janie Poe complex. The subject of a scathing 2004 documentary that helped instigate the federal takeover, Janie Poe is gone by June. New pipes and infrastructure are under way for the redevelopment project, which will include low-income and market-rate units.

It is July 9, City Commission chambers. Amid hoopla, speeches and congratulations, the seven citizens take the oath of office as new housing authority board members. Federal chiefs bow out and officially return control to the locals, noting that the journey from troubled to recovered was remarkably brief by HUD standards. They also warn that much hard work lies ahead.

Though it's called local control, HUD and Congress set the rules and funding. The housing authority's challenge is considerable: overseeing tight budgets; clients with extremely low incomes and high social-service needs; and complex redevelopment programs.

Still, the new board has the advantages of training, a clean balance sheet, cooperative rapport with public housing tenants, the strong skills of executive director Bill Russell, and the community's good will.

Let's keep things that way.

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