

Housing project progresses in Orange

By Chris Sykes
Staff Writer

Despite the current recession, the Orange Housing Authority is making moves to aid in the redevelopment of the city.

Taking advantage of federal funding offered through the economic stimulus package, the authority is moving ahead with its plans to build 166 units of affordable housing on Parrow Street and Wilson Place. The housing will replace the Dr. Walter G. Alexander housing complex.

"We applaud the whole redevelopment of the area because we think it is vitally important to the future of the city of Orange," said Walter McNeil Jr., the authority's executive director. "We relocated all of the 140 residents successfully by Dec. 5, 2009. Each one of them got a Section 8 voucher to assist with their resettlement. It was challenging because we ended up putting together an individual housing plan for every one of the residents that included where they were going to live, educational goals, economic goals, employment goals and future housing goals."

McNeil said the current buildings will be demolished "bit by bit and piece by piece" until the rubble is removed from the site by June and ready to be replaced by the new housing.

Councilwoman Donna K. Williams said she is excited because the authority project is proof that positive things are happening in terms of redevelopment efforts in Orange "even in these trying, challenging times." She said the credit for the project has to go to McNeil and the authority board because they moved it through the federal application and selection process.

"The Housing Authority has created a corporation to assist them in their redevelopment efforts and that makes it a little bit more safe and stable than having a private developer do it because they have the financing and backing of the federal government behind them," said Williams. "They're very progressive in what they're trying to do. We had a community meeting at Oakwood Avenue School to let people know what's going on and it went really well."

During the meeting, consultants discussed the phases of the demolition and redevelopment and assured residents that all precautions would be taken to insure that all parts of the project would be environmentally safe and that work would take place in the least disruptive manner possible.

McNeil and other authority officials informed residents that the first phase will consist of 63 one-bedroom rental units. Williams

said seeing the planned redevelopment of the area is "exciting," while he said it is part of his agency's "master plan" for the revitalization of the properties it manages and surrounding sites.

"This demolition and ultimate redevelopment presents the Housing Authority and the city with an opportunity to revitalize a struggling neighborhood and provide low- and moderate- income families with far better housing," said McNeil.

Clifford Ross, chairman of the authority's board, said the project will complete an era in Orange, a period in which many urban municipalities were participants.

"High-rise public housing developments designed and built over 50 years ago, like the Dr. Walter G. Alexander Court, are no longer compatible with the neighborhoods of which they are a part," said Clifford Ross, the authority board's chairman. "The cost to rehabilitate this outdated and severely distressed development would have far exceeded our available financial resources."

Ross said the best redevelopment option open to the authority was to demolish the buildings and replace them with affordable housing. He said that meant the project would be "a win-win for our community."