

Unraveling the city's housing ills

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doggedly optimistic. When he first took office, Corpening says, people told him he wouldn't be able to initiate his plan of developing more than 2,500 units for low- and moderate-income families. But since 1975, the city has done just that.

Through rehabilitation loans from the city's Community Development Department, 1,600 units were repaired between 1975 and 1983.

More than 1,400 units have been brought up to standards during the last two years through the enforcement of the city's housing code. Ninety-four others were demolished during that period, as were 20 non-residential buildings, costing the city more than \$1 million.

Eleven thousand two hundred units were brought into compliance with the code during that eight-year period and another 700 to 800 units were demolished, according to a report issued by the mayor's office. The city conservatively estimates that it paid more than \$12 million for structural rehabilitation during the eight-year period.

As for new housing to fill empty land that was razed in the 60s during urban renewal, there is some. On April 9, the city's request for a federal Urban Development Action Grant (UDAG) to build 100 low- and moderate-income apartments in East Winston on 12th and File streets was denied. But plans for the \$4 million project have not been altered, city officials say, and construction will begin in late summer or early fall.

"Subsidized housing on the federal level is drying up," Corpening says, "but we've begged borrowed and stolen to get every unit we could."

City Manager Bill Stuart already had anticipated that the city might not get the UDAG funding because, contrary to what others might believe, he says, cities in other states are facing much greater housing problems.

"Getting projects approved through UDAG is competitive," he says. "They (federal officials) like to hand out to cities who are really in distress."

"While we do qualify as distressed," Stuart says, "we're not as bad as other cities."

Like the mayor, Stuart believes that solving the housing problem can't be left to the federal government alone.

"I see the state taking an ever-increasing interest in the subject of housing," he says, "and, as far as I'm concerned, we need to do all we can to push the state into getting more involved."

"You can dream about it if you want to," Stuart says, "but the federal government has its hands full with a \$200-billion deficit."

Last year, Stuart says, the state provided a new revenue source for housing: a half-cent sales tax revenue, which can pay off authorized bonds or subsidize housing. State law says up to 20 percent of the revenue generated by the sales tax from each city may be used for housing.

The Board of Aldermen agreed to use all but \$20,000 of the \$400,000 maximum amount for the 12th and File streets project to make up for the UDAG loss, says Stuart.

Another solution is still in the planning stages. The city is studying Seventh and Graham Streets for more low- and moderate-income housing projects, with \$657,000 of city money already committed to the plan.

Mark Vieno, a Minnesota-based developer and a major investor in the proposed project, recently pulled his financial support. However, Brown says the city began taking bids from other potential investors on July 16.

"I feel like we're ahead of the other cities," Stuart says. "We don't say we have all the answers, but none of the model cities -- Charlotte, Greensboro, Raleigh or Durham -- can say they've done what we have with the sales tax."

Overall, a recent study recommended that the city activate a 12-year program to create 3,200

new homes in central Winston-Salem. One-fourth, or 800, of the new homes are expected to be low- to moderate-income housing, says Stuart, and a close relationship has been established by the city government with the North Carolina Housing Finance Agency to establish new homes in the Kimberly Park and East Winston neighborhoods. Those neighborhoods will be eligible for low-interest mortgage rates.

Yet another, unique solution isn't faring very well so far. In Alderman Virginia Newell's East Ward, the plan of selling lots for \$1 is not attracting takers.

"People without homes have not developed enough skills to build their own homes," Newell says, "especially inner-city people. I think it's our responsibility to help our people learn how to help themselves."

Why not train people to build, Newell suggests, using minority and retired developers and contractors?

"Winston-Salem's housing problems are within the realms of solvability," she says.

Even with plans for constructing new housing units, many residents of substandard housing will still be without because there are so many of them.

"After all we do," City Manager Stuart says, "there will still be ill-housed people, but we'll keep looking for ways to improve."

As long as residents occupy substandard homes, many of whom some city officials say would prefer not to leave them,

establishing good tenant-landlord relationships, as well as local governmental involvement, will remain essential.

A major breakthrough in the city's housing code was approved by the Board of Aldermen on May 22.

Landlords and tenants found in violation of renting or occupying a condemned dwelling -- once they have been notified by the city's inspection staff that the property is unfit -- will face misdemeanor charges amounting to no more than 30 days in jail or a \$50 fine for each day the order is violated.

On July 28, the board approved a \$173,000 budget for relocating residents whose dwellings violate code standards.

And, on July 9, the city submitted a rental rehabilitation proposal to the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development. Brown says the proposed project would provide funds to stimulate investor/owners to upgrade their property and provide subsidies to eligible tenants.

Some landlords blame the tenants themselves for the problems and many of the tenants blame the landlords for the conditions.

Vernon Ferrell of Ferrell Realty Co. on Fifth Street owns and manages a cluster of homes in the East Winston community, including four 8-, 12- and 16-unit apartment buildings. He maintains that his business has an open line of communication with tenants and does its best to keep its property up.

"We break our necks to do the right thing," Ferrell says. "We pride ourselves in keeping our property above standard."

Of all the problems he can document, Ferrell says, tenants' lack of responsibility is a major one.

"I've wanted the city to set up some type of program to teach people housekeeping management," he says. "I don't care how modest your income is, soap and water is cheap."

Ferrell says he makes it a point to be concerned about his residents and their surroundings and says his company isn't in the business of feeding off the poor when repairs are made to property.

"I think the landlord has the responsibility to make the house, no matter how modest it is, as comfortable and livable as possible," Ferrell says. "And, of course, the tenant has a responsibility, too. We have a lot of good tenants in East Winston and, with any reasonable request, they'll get what they want."

Brown says that, when landlords continue to maintain below-standard homes, his office should be notified and he says the same goes for tenants who refuse to take proper care of their homes.

"It's a source of continuous frustration for the landlords to keep up these houses," he says, "and, if the problems persist, they can pursue legal action."

"If the landlords would just take time out to work with their tenants ..."

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