

Somalis behind bars

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status, they are detained indefinitely, this is not much different from a life sentence," said Jamal.

Meanwhile, a Somali news report stated recently that proposed peace talks among Somali political groups were abandoned. The talks, originally scheduled for December 9, then postponed

to Dec. 18 have been put off again, said the IRIN News Agency.

Ugandan President, Yoweri Museveni, a facilitator of the peace initiative, is trying to arrange a meeting of Somali leaders in Kampala. The purpose of the original 10-day talks, due to be held in Mombasa, was "to give the leaders a chance to

iron out outstanding issues and engage in personal reconciliation", IRIN reported.

Talks have been underway since October 2002 and have been dogged by wrangles over issues such as an interim charter, the number of participants and the selection of future parliamentarians.

Charlotte faces the possibility of increased financial role for housing

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Charlotte's next — and perhaps last — major HOPE VI initiative is the renovation of 62-year-old Piedmont Courts. The 242-unit public housing complex off 10th Street is in need of a makeover, but city council is balking at making a \$17 million commitment over five years that could clinch a \$20 grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The grant would ultimately bring 964 homes and apartments to Piedmont Courts and neighboring Belmont community. The city could continue to pursue HOPE VI money by coming up with its share of the money next month; delay its application or abandon the federal grant for local solutions.

"Personally, I think it's a philosophical shift" with the federal government easing out of public housing, Bush said. "I just don't understand why housing people isn't a priority of any government entity. It feels like the federal government is getting out of public housing."

Help for Charlotte's dilemma could come from quasi-independent entities: the housing authority, which provides homes for low-income families, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Housing Partnership, which provides what Mitchell calls "working housing" for families with

incomes between \$38,000-\$45,000. The partnership, he believes can take on a more significant role because it doesn't face the bureaucratic red tape of a municipality when seeking grants.

"We need to leverage as much as we can to make the housing partnership our number one provider," he said.

The partnership, which opened in 1989, uses public and private sources for building homes and fund mortgages. Pat Garrett, CMHP's president, said the organization's diversity of income helps.

Our strength is we do a lot of mixed income stuff and financing," she said. "We have a history of using everybody's money — the state's the city's, the homeowner's."

Charlotte's corporate community, a major player in previous mixed-income communities that sprang from public housing neighborhoods, may be leery of jumping into uncertain markets. With the economy just starting to show signs of recovery, corporations are likely to hedge their long-term bets.

"When times are great, our corporate partners have been right there," Mitchell said. "But I don't see as much of that now. They tell us 'we're in it to make money.'"

Said Garrett: "There's a

role for everybody in affordable housing. Banks have been a help but they're looking for a return (although the return doesn't necessarily have to be money. One of the things we need to do is get everybody to understand that public housing affects everybody."

The business of housing is ruthless. Cities compete for federal dollars and individual projects compete for city attention. Even community-based groups have to hustle for dollars.

"We face the same restrictions as everybody else," says Garrett of the housing partnership. It's still hard for us because it's competition. It's not easier, but it puts us in a better position."

Another possibility is funding projects through bond referendums. Although politically risky because it raises the possibility of tax increases and/or fees, it can measure public support for housing. Either way, Bush says Charlotte must address the issue.

"With a lot of issues, we have some choices, some paths we can take for housing as a community," she said. "We have to make a commitment to housing people. I think it's a moral crisis for us as a city. We want to be world class, but I don't think we're going to be if we don't have a commitment to house people."

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