

In The News



COMEBACK UNDER WAY IN NORTHWEST ATLANTA

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On a driving tour of new neighborhoods, developer Steve Brock points to a picturesque rock retaining wall behind a subdivision just being built. He drives by neat new houses with colorful flags out front. He gestures to a view down a tree-lined street that's unobstructed because utility lines are buried.

The communities are designed to be neighborly places where folks wave and chat from porches to others strolling down sidewalks.

What makes Brock's tour so interesting is that he's showing off part of northwest Atlanta, a region that for nearly 50 years has been synonymous with crime, violence and blight. Now there's a massive effort to reclaim a significant portion of an area that fostered despair and disinvestment in every direction.

The old Perry Homes housing project a few miles west of downtown Atlanta has been demolished. Shabby barracks and apartments that once housed more than 1,000 families were tossed into a trash bin to reveal land that undulates as comfortably as the hills north of Lawrenceville and south of Canton.

Perry Homes is being replaced by a new community called West Highlands.

Brock is one of three private partners working with the public Atlanta Housing Authority to build a vibrant mixed-use community on 460 acres. Planned amenities include a YMCA, library, public school, golf course, more than 90 acres of green space and a nearby trail built by the PATH Foundation.

Today the community will have an official grand opening featuring remarks by Alphonso Jackson, secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin. One undercurrent of the event will be the apparent success of West Highlands at a time when the Bush administration is calling for the elimination of the federal program that helped pay for the new community.

The potential evolution could not be more dramatic in a neighborhood where the housing project had long cast a big and unsettling pall.

"Perry Homes didn't just scare development away; it repelled it," Brock says.

Impoverished residents simply overwhelmed their neighborhood. They had virtually no disposable income, so the big grocery stores and other retailers never came calling. The numbers are staggering.

After Perry Homes residents began moving out in 1998, household income shot up by 73 percent. Figures released by the housing authority show the area's median household income rose from about \$12,200 in 1990 to \$21,000 a decade later -- after some 2,300 individuals moved from Perry.

Brock's tour wasn't through West Highlands. His first homes there are just starting to come out of the ground. The developer was driving through three communities he built a short distance away.

The 161 houses in Adams Crossing have sold out, and about 10 of 61 houses remain available in Parkview. Both communities have Craftsman-style houses in old-fashioned neighborhoods, where houses are close to the street and have sitting porches overlooking sidewalks and alleys in the rear.

Houses in the third project, like the previous two, are being purchased by young buyers who want to live intown but balk at sky-high prices in more established neighborhoods, Brock says. Dupont Commons will offer a wider variety of architectural styles along with a clubhouse, pool, 4-acre park and putting green.

At West Highlands, Brock plans to build about 1,100 single-family houses ranging in price for most buyers from \$179,000 to \$400,000-plus. Initially prices will start in the \$200,000s and rise as the project is completed over the next seven or so years. Also in the first round of construction will be houses with prices starting at \$149,000 and reserved for buyers with household incomes that are below the metro median.

The first phase of apartments in West Highlands has opened, and all 124 units are occupied. Many are former residents of the old housing project, says Noel

Khalil, a partner with Columbia Residential. All must adhere to strict guidelines of good behavior.

Khalil has big plans for the area and is one of its most vocal supporters. He plans to build about 700 additional rental units in West Highlands, many reserved for residents with incomes below the metro median.

Khalil is familiar with transitional intown markets. He hit the mark with an apartment project offering lower-cost housing south of Little Five Points. Khalil also will build the residences planned next door at the mixed-use development on Moreland Avenue by Sembler Co.

Khalil readily admits that buyers of Brock's houses are moving into a part of Atlanta that, at best, can be called transitional. He thinks the investment soon will be worth the potential challenge of pioneering in West Highlands.

"They are getting a huge value in their house because they'd have to pay an extra \$200,000 for the same house in other parts of Atlanta," Khalil says. "There will be a slight inconvenience in the short term, but in the long term this will be a terrific community."

The boosters of West Highlands think the stars have aligned for the area to turn around. In addition to benefiting from a renewed interest in intown living, the project got a bump from the government.

The federal government provided \$20 million to revitalize the community through the Hope VI program. The housing program allows for public-private partnerships to tear down dilapidated public housing complexes and replace them with mixed-income communities. Some well-known examples in Atlanta include Centennial Place, between Georgia Tech and downtown Atlanta, and the Villages at East Lake, between downtown and Decatur.

Local governments stepped up, as well. The city and county governments and the Atlanta school board approved a special tax incentive to pay for new roads, sewers and other infrastructure in the area around Perry Boulevard and Bolton Road.

The region around West Highlands has improved sharply since the demolition of Perry Homes was started six years ago.

Nearby, Brock's three subdivisions anchor the western border, and he intends to build a total of 30,000 square feet of retail on three corners he owns at the intersection of Marietta and Bolton roads. He had hoped to sell the land to a retailer but decided to build a neighborhood node by himself because the only potential takers just wanted to build gas stations.

Closer to downtown Atlanta, a new apartment development poised to open on the border of the Georgia Tech campus erased a foreboding metal recycling center.

Residents are moving into Atlantic Station, and construction has started on its retail complex. Just north of Atlantic Station on Northside Drive, Selig Enterprises is developing a residential and retail center near Howell Mill Road and I-75.

Earlier this year, the Atlanta Regional Commission provided \$75,000 in study money that investors expect to use to begin redeveloping a swath of 1,600 acres of largely industrial land west of Northside Drive.

Brock says he's comfortable with his investment in and around West Highlands. Before taking on Atlanta's western frontier, he built subdivisions in a region near MARTA's Brookhaven station, which, at the time, was viewed as marginal.

"There are still some very bad spots just a mile from West Highlands," Brock says. "But I look for areas that can be turned around, and this area never scared me. It has the critical mass to be a very successful community."