

# In The News



## TREES TEACH LESSON AT WEST HIGHLANDS

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The beautiful rolling hills of the West Highlands development on Perry Boulevard are wrapped with fluorescent orange fencing surrounding countless old-growth trees, protecting them from the construction.

The massive development, which eventually will include 1,000 single-family homes, 780 new apartments and an 18-hole golf course, will be softened by the presence of trees -- most of them planted more than 40 years ago, when the now-demolished Perry Homes public housing project was developed.

But those trees might not have been there today had it not been for community activist Jackie Echols working with Atlanta City Councilwoman Felicia Moore. They negotiated an agreement with Noel Khalil, general managing partner of Perry Homes Redevelopment/West Highlands. Khalil, a multifamily developer, then got his two partners -- Steve Brock, a single-family developer, and Chip Drury, a golf course developer -- to go along.

"It's been an enlightening process for me, and I frankly think that the development is turning out to be much better," Khalil said. "I really regret that I didn't make protecting the trees a part of the master plan initially. It was a tremendous missed opportunity."

The first 7 acres of the 152-acre site were planned with no consideration to the existing trees. That's when Echols and community leaders began to challenge the West Highlands development and got the developers to protect the trees.

Their agreement called for saving at least 20 percent of the trees on the remaining 145 acres -- and that did not include the trees that were part of the stream buffer.

Echols spent three days walking the site with project managers identifying which trees should be saved, if possible.

Mike Haney, West Highlands project manager for Brock Built, showed how they rerouted one of the main streets through the development to save two gorgeous trees that will line the project's central park area.

And that's the way developments should be done -- respect the natural environment by developing buildings and roads around trees.

Unfortunately many developers find it much easier to clear cut a piece of property, develop a traditional subdivision and plant skinny trees that may provide shade in 50 years.

Steve Brock, the home builder who has been the pioneer developer in this northwest corner of Atlanta, has done it both ways.

Most of his developments, such as Adams Crossing, show how it shouldn't be done. The handful of old-growth trees that were incorporated in the project are dying because they were not properly protected and nurtured during construction.

A site that Brock is developing across from Bolton Academy shows that most of the mature trees on the buildable part of the property have been marked with that deadly fluorescent orange "X."

On the other extreme, there's the Steve Brock that's involved in the West Highlands development, where trees rule.

"Having to work around the trees is more difficult than your standard development practices," Brock said. "It makes for a more beautiful development, but it's a little painful."

Brock called the trees at West Highlands "as picturesque as they can be" because they've been growing for more than 40 years with virtually no disturbance.

"When you look at the end product, it's beautiful, but it does require more sensitivity and more diligence," Brock said. "It's an educational process we all have to go through, but the end product is worth the extra effort."

Neighborhood leaders, however, are concerned that Brock still hasn't fully learned the lesson of West Highland.

"Old habits die hard," said Councilwoman Moore, who does give Brock credit for investing in an area of town that had been ignored for more than 40 years. "Unless a developer has a personal interest in trees and nature, they see them as obstacles. A mature tree is a premium."

Mark Welborn, who bought one of the few Brock houses in Adams Crossing with a mature tree, had to cut down the tree after a year because it was dead. Now Welborn has become a community leader trying to get Brock to save more trees in future developments.

"My real agenda is trying to point out to other neighborhoods that might have to go through this with someone like Steve Brock that builders need to quit cutting down all these trees," Welborn said. "Buyers will be willing to spend more money when there's an old-growth tree in the front yard."

While the whole metro Atlanta region needs to learn this lesson, it's particularly relevant in the northwest part of Atlanta, which is bordered by industrial buildings and filled with some of the city's poorest residents living in dilapidated homes.

The best features of this part of town are the beautiful trees and undisturbed green space that soften the surrounding hard cityscape. To destroy that natural amenity will diminish the economic potential of these communities.

And West Highlands is a perfect example of how trees contribute to a community's value and quality of life -- showing that developments can be sensitive to the natural environment.