



PHOTOS/SPECIAL

West Highlands | From depressed to delightful By Lori Johnston

As soon as Christine Banks read in the paper three years ago about plans to redevelop the infamous Perry Homes site, she knew she wanted to live there.

She cut out the article and called the Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA) to express her interest in the new northwest Atlanta neighborhood. The authority gave her the number for single-family developer Brock Built Homes LLC.

Banks spoke with Steve Brock, who told her that development was just beginning and she should keep an eye out for news about home sales in a year or so.

Meanwhile, Banks' family questioned her desire to move to an area that



Brock described as "the most depressed, roughest, toughest housing project" he had ever seen.

But Banks said she believed in the vision for the community, which eventually will have apartments, single-family homes, senior living, parks, a town center, a YMCA and more.

"It sounded so wonderful," said

Banks, an emergency planning assistant with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission who attended Archer High School near Perry Homes in the 1960s. "It was so exciting to me. I've always lived in the area; that's my home."

She ended up being the first buyer in West Highlands, adding upgrades to a home that started at \$250,000. In February, Banks moved into her four-bedroom, Craftsman-style home, which is situated in front of a park with a fountain she enjoys viewing from her front porch.

The mixed-use, mixed-income community is a partnership between the AHA, YMCA, Brock Built Homes, Columbia Residential LLC and Perry Golf Course Development LLC. The AHA leveraged \$25 million in grants from the U.S. Department of Housing

continued on page 42

continued from page 40
and Urban Development into the \$428 million public-private project.

Renee Glover, CEO of the AHA, said the vision was to create a community with the feel of Ansley Park, which she admits was setting the bar high.

Perry Homes was the poster child for a concentration of poverty, with more than 1,000 units of barracks-style public housing over 131 acres. Another annex site had 128 units. The neighborhood had no amenities, no services and a poor-performing elementary school.

West Highlands will have at least a half-a-billion-dollar impact to an area that hasn't had significant investment in decades, Glover said.

Brock is building 1,200 housing units — mostly single-family homes with some townhouses and condos. Prices are broken into two categories: \$148,500 for the affordable-housing buyers and from the \$200,000s to \$300,000s for market-rate customers.

"We wanted to have a very walkable, pedestrian-friendly neighborly community where it would foster the inter-

action between the public housing residents as well as the market-rate residents," Brock said.

West Highlands is the fourth time the AHA and YMCA have worked to build healthy communities.

Although the actual facility isn't yet under construction, the YMCA is offering programs to West Highlands' residents through the Buckhead YMCA. A sports field, which will house the Atlanta Falcons Football Academy to promote physical activity among kids, and temporary modular units, soon will be added.

Noel Khalil, a partner in Columbia Residential, said he's been able to help re-create the image of the Perry Homes site. About 40 percent of those who are renting his completed apartments used to live in Perry Homes, he said.

"It's going to improve their quality of living for public housing residents that are returning," he said. "It will serve as a catalyst for redevelopment in the area and create better long-term opportunities in terms of attracting retail providers." **LA**



THE WEST HIGHLANDS STORY SO FAR

WHAT'S COMPLETE:

- ▶ Columbia Estates and Columbia Park Citi — 278 apartments ranging from \$625 to \$825 a month
- ▶ Columbia Heritage Senior Residences — 132 units
- ▶ A few single-family homes — the remaining 24 homes in the first phase should all be complete in 90 days
- ▶ A town center and Perry Park, with an amphitheater, picnic pavilions, lake and a playground

WHAT'S TO COME:

- ▶ Columbia Crest, with 154 units and 5,000 square feet of retail, is expected to open this fall.
- ▶ Columbia Grove will break ground in July with another 132 apartments.
- ▶ 18-hole public golf course
- ▶ YMCA facilities

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