

The new vision for Jack R. Wells homes includes mixed-income units Housing project to be razed, redeveloped

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The Athens Housing Authority will demolish a Hawthorne Avenue housing project and replace it with mixed-income housing, the authority announced today.

Jack R. Wells Homes, commonly known as Pauldoe, was slated for renovation over the next few years. Instead, AHA officials decided to work with a private company to completely redevelop the 40-acre, 125-unit apartment complex built in 1967.

AHA Executive Director Rick Parker described the project as a transformation, rather than a modernization.

"We were faced with a choice," he said. "Do we do what we've always done, or do we do something more?"

AHA is working with Columbia Residential, an Atlanta-based company that has redeveloped five other public housing projects in Atlanta, Marietta, Columbus and New Orleans.

The redevelopment would double the number of affordable units at Pauldoe.

The new Pauldoe will include about 350 units, two-thirds of them affordable and the rest market rate, Parker and Columbia Residential executives said. One-third of the units will be public housing, where rent is tied to tenants' income. In another third, rent will be capped at 30 percent of 60 percent of the Athens median income, or about \$600 per month.

The subsidized units will be indistinguishable from the market-rate ones, Columbia CEO Noel Khalil and COO Jim Grauley said.

Work force rental housing is one of Athens' most pressing needs because many low-income workers cannot afford to buy a home and most apartments are leased to college students by the bedroom, according to several studies by AHA, the anti-poverty group OneAthens and others.

While the complex is being redeveloped, Pauldoe residents will be given Section 8 vouchers to rent their own housing, Parker said. Once the new development is finished, they will be given priority to move back, he said.

"We're not going to leave our residents out in the cold, obviously," he said.

Pauldoe residents are behind the redevelopment and helped select Columbia Residential to oversee it, AHA officials said. UGA social-work students surveyed residents anonymously, and 70 percent favored it, Parker said.

Two AHA board members who grew up in Athens public housing, Valdon Daniel and Frank Platt, said they favor redevelopment over renovation.

"In talking to the residents, they want change," Daniel said. "That's what's important to the housing authority."

Columbia Residential is applying for state Department of Community Affairs tax credits to subsidize the development and keep rents low. DCA issues tax credits for affordable housing that developers can turn around and sell to raise money. In exchange, some of the units must remain affordable for 30 years.

Details about what the redevelopment would look like are sparse. The University of Georgia School of Environment and Design will hold a charette -- an informal, intensive community design process -- in October to gather input from Pauldoe residents and others in the community. A master plan should be finished by the end of the year, Parker said.

"At the end of the day, we want it to be specific to Athens," architect Ron Harwick said.

Construction is scheduled to start in early 2013 and take three years to finish.

Other Columbia Residential developments, such as Columbia Parc at the Bayou District in New Orleans, appear to be upscale even though some rents are below market. The company built 466 units, retail space, a pool, community center, gym, theater, computer center and playgrounds at the site of the St. Bernard housing project, which was destroyed by flooding during Hurricane Katrina.

Replacing traditional public housing -- which can breed pockets of crime and intergenerational poverty -- with mixed-income developments is a nationwide trend. The Atlanta Housing Authority, for example, is replacing all of its low-income housing with mixed-income housing and Section 8 vouchers.

The difference between Athens and Atlanta, though, is that Pauldoe public-housing residents will not be permanently displaced.

If the Pauldoe redevelopment goes well, others of the 11 housing projects AHA runs also could be redeveloped, Parker said.

"If it works well for both the Athens Housing Authority and the community, why wouldn't we?" he said.

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