

## **THE CARVER COURT PUBLIC HOUSING SITE HISTORY AND THE NEW CARVER PARK**

### **Public Housing**

Carver Court and Griffin Park were the Orlando Housing Authority's two oldest public housing developments, built in 1945 and 1941, respectively. Both were located in the Parramore Heritage area of the City of Orlando, approximately one mile west of downtown Orlando. Together, the two sites housed about 390 families and elderly persons. In 2001, 212 units of housing at the Carver Court site were demolished. The entire Parramore district is a one mile square area and is the focus of an extensive revitalization planning process by the City: Pathways to Parramore. The new City of Orlando efforts to revitalize the Parramore Heritage district have a strongly directed approach. Even though the Orlando Housing Authority carries the name of the City of Orlando, OHA is not a City agency. The Orlando Housing Authority has public housing and Section 8 units in Orange County.

### **Parramore Area**

In recent years, the Parramore Heritage district had one the lowest income and educational levels of the City, and one of the highest crime rates, particularly with regard to drug-related crime. Vacant lots, sub-standard housing and homelessness contributed to the decline of the area. A vibrant downtown district surrounds the Parramore area. However, the Parramore district is, essentially, "cut-off" from downtown by Interstate 4 and State Road 408 (the "East-West Expressway"). The Florida Department of Transportation is expanding and realigning both roadways, creating better access to a previously disenfranchised community. The new configuration will pull the community back together physically and figuratively.

The Parramore Heritage district is a historically African-American community with a rich cultural heritage. Thirty years ago it was a livable, family community. With the addition of the highways, effectively splitting the community from downtown, as well as the flight of families to the suburbs, neglect created a community in need of revitalization. The population remains mostly African-American, with a significant West Indian population as well. Because of a desegregation order from the early 1970's, children are bussed to several different elementary schools. The Nap Ford Charter School is the only elementary school in the Parramore neighborhood. The Orlando Housing Authority's properties are well maintained and offer among the best affordable housing in the community. Further, the Orlando Housing Authority is one of the largest property owners in the area.

## **Challenges**

The challenge of preparing a plan for redevelopment was maintaining the integrity of the neighborhoods and avoiding a “gentrification” process that makes properties unaffordable to the present population. Since the area is about 90% rental, homeownership is a major focus of the initiatives.

Constructed in 1945, Carver Court originally consisted of 160 residential units in twenty-eight (28) buildings and one (1) office building, positioned near the east boundary of the property, on Short Avenue.

In the early 1960s, six (6) buildings from the nearby Griffin Park public housing complex were relocated to the west side of the Carver Court property to accommodate the construction of Interstate Highway 4, thereby adding fifty-two (52) residential units to the original number at Carver Court. OHA's central maintenance facility was subsequently constructed on the southeast corner of the 18 acre site and will remain, undergoing substantial rehabilitation to blend it into the rest of the development.

## **Soil Impact**

Carver Court was negatively affected by numerous soil impact issues, as well as design-related, structural, and system-wide problems that ultimately became a hazard to the health, safety, and well-being of its residents. Because of its public image, and the stigma associated with it, the presence of the complex not only contributed to the decline that the south Parramore neighborhood experienced during the 1970's and 1980's, but has also hindered efforts by the City of Orlando and OHA to stimulate reinvestment and revitalization in the neighborhood. For these reasons, OHA determined that total demolition and redevelopment of the property was the only viable approach to resolving the severe physical, social, and economic problems both on the Carver Court site and in the adjoining area.

Since Carver Court complex was built on the site of a former landfill, it is likely that little or no soil preparation was done on the site to accommodate the construction of the one- and two-story rowhouse structures, which were built directly on the surface without benefit of the traditional foundations and footings commonly used in Central Florida. As a result, the presence of unconsolidated debris underneath most of the site began to cause differential settlement of the structures almost immediately after they were completed. Over the buildings' nearly 57 years of existence, the concrete block walls, foundation walls, and concrete floor slabs continued to deteriorate, despite OHA's efforts to maintain quality housing. Maintenance difficulties were compounded by cracking foundations, uneven floors, and displacement of columns supporting the roofs, all due to settlement of the structures.

## **Demolition**

The demolition of Carver Court was completed in July of 2002. The demolition represented the first step in the implementation of OHA's comprehensive strategy to improve the overall health of the neighborhood. Redeveloped as Carver Park, it will serve as an anchor to spur outside investment in the surrounding community. This approach is fully consistent with OHA's mission to stimulate neighborhood redevelopment beyond the boundaries of existing public housing. It is also complementary to the City of Orlando's ongoing efforts for revitalizing the former Parramore Village, which will be redeveloped as Wells' Landing, homeownership units. As a result of these efforts, the Parramore Heritage District, the historic African-American community of which Carver Park is a vital link, will be a unique and vibrant urban neighborhood.