

# Time for a change?

## Community is at crossroads

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A March 2000 report that summarized the failures of public housing in the United States foretold the eventual fate of Covington's Jacob Price Homes.

"Discussions of urban problems," the report read, "often focus on a concentration of poverty in a neighborhood as a cause of a host of urban ills including crime, joblessness, teen parenthood and substance abuse. For this reason, high-rise public housing has come under much criticism because of its density and concentration of low-income families."

Helping families move out of "distressed" complexes, according to researchers for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, "is a policy that can help improve both the lives of families and the future of neighborhoods."

Jacob Price isn't a high-rise, but it's concentrated and dense, with 163 apartments within a few blocks along Covington's Greenup Street. It's also rife with the same social problems outlined in the HUD report.

Now, faced with either spending \$14 million to \$19 million to update the 66-year-old complex or finding a better way, Covington housing officials have decided there's a better way.

Like public housing authorities across the nation, including Cincinnati and Newport, Covington has decided that Jacob Price's residents and the city itself would be better off with the complex broken up and residents spread out in subsidized housing around the city.

The strategy they will employ to make that change will be explained today during a news conference near the corner of Greenup and Robbins.

Officials say they don't want to reveal the details until today's event, but the general outline is known: The troubled complex in Covington's Eastside will be demolished little by little as new housing is found.

The plan will take years. On April 20, HUD officials approved the Covington Housing Authority's proposal to tear down three buildings on the northern side of the complex containing 24 apartments. Only about half of

those units are occupied, and residents will be temporarily moved elsewhere in the complex.

By 2009, officials hope to have the whole complex demolished and residents living in rehabbed housing elsewhere in Eastside or in Covington, likely using vouchers that HUD will have to approve.

"The goal is to get tenants to integrate with the rest of the community rather than to be an isolated group," said Tom Schmitz, interim director of the housing authority. "It gets away from the stigma of 'I live in public housing.' "

The change will create a deeper sense of ownership among low-income residents and should give them better housing in general, Schmitz said.

"When we built these developments in the '30s, '40s and '50s, they worked well, but lifestyles were different then," Schmitz said. "There was not as much need for space, and society was more tolerant of each other."

A spokeswoman for HUD in Louisville said the agency strongly supports Covington's plan. Over the last few decades, HUD has encouraged numerous housing authorities, when the opportunity presented itself, to break apart concentrated public housing and scatter low-income residents out into the community.

"The idea is that all neighborhoods are healthy if there's a diversity of all incomes, a diversity of interests, a diversity of races and ethnic backgrounds," she said.

Many such projects were funded by HOPE VI, the federal program created in 1992 to rehab public housing across the nation. A theory driving HOPE VI was that the design and density of barracks-style public complexes caused blight instead of preventing it, thus working against the very people subsidized housing is supposed to assist.

Newport is in the middle of a huge HOPE VI project designed to accomplish two goals - break up a pocket of poverty and free up valuable land for development along the Licking River north of Fourth Street. Bulldozers and backhoes are in the middle of tearing down a 31-building complex run by the Newport Housing Authority.

At one time, the complex had 198 families; 14 are left and will be relocated by June 30, said Joe Condit, executive director of the Newport Housing

Authority. The authority has partnered with public and private agencies and builders to develop market-rate and affordable housing around the city.

The change of location should be beneficial to the residents, Condit said.

"It will increase their ability to go further economically. For a lot of people, (a public housing complex) is a negative environment," he said.

The demolition of Jacob Price theoretically also will free up land for development, but "there's no decision at this point on what will go there," said city Commissioner Jerry Stricker. "That will take a lot of input from a lot of people ... there's no preconceived notions."

The city has been acquiring property in the area for some time for potential rehab, Stricker said.

For Covington to mirror Newport's success, the housing authority will need to get creative in finding the money to spur rehab, seeking grants from government agencies and low-income housing tax credits from the state, Schmitz said.

"Financing is the critical factor," he said. "Without a financing vehicle of some sort (it won't happen)."

Stricker said the city likes the project because periodic violence and steady drug dealing in Jacob Price has been such a drain on the city and the complex's appearance hurts the city's image.

But many longtime residents of the complex have fought the demolition plans since the beginning, saying the city would be better off fighting the crime and revitalizing the community instead of making them move.

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