



Feds OK closure of City Heights

Residents to be relocated over 3-year period

(EDITOR'S NOTE: The City of Covington is publicizing this release on behalf of the Housing Authority of Covington.)

COVINGTON, Ky. – After two years of scrutiny, federal housing officials have approved plans to shut down the beleaguered City Heights barracks-style public housing complex in Covington, acknowledging that its 366 apartments are severely deteriorated, outdated, and beyond saving.

Roughly 20 percent of the units are already vacant, and the process of finding subsidized housing in Covington or elsewhere for the remaining residents is expected to take three years.

“We’ve been preparing residents for this eventuality for a long time now, and as we’ve assured them time and again, we will be very hands-on in helping them find new places to live,” said Steve Arlinghaus, Executive Director of the Housing Authority of Covington, which operates City Heights.

Over the last two years, HAC staff have kept residents abreast of the closure application through community meetings, monthly newsletters, videos posted on social media, and meetings with the City Heights Community Council and the Resident Advisory Board.

This morning, HAC staff notified the Community Council of the latest announcement and is distributing fliers throughout the complex.

Four meetings with residents to discuss the latest development will take place in the City Heights Community Hall, 2500 Todd St., on:

- Oct. 7, from 1 p.m. to 2:30 p.m. and 6 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.
- Oct. 11, from 10:30 a.m. to noon and 6 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.

The approval came in the form of a letter dated Thursday to Arlinghaus from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Special Applications Center.

Local officials said the closure – which has been discussed for decades and pursued formally since the HAC board voted Dec. 18, 2019, to seek approval from HUD – is about providing “dignity” for residents.

“Every family deserves to live in a place they’re proud to call ‘home,’ ” said Covington Mayor Joe Meyer, who also serves as Chairman of the HAC board. “Tragically, City Heights is not such a place and will never be, no matter how much money is thrown at it. It’s isolated, run-down, unsafe, and founded on a long-failed model for public housing. Our families and our city deserve better.”

The problems with City Heights center on its condition and location:

Over \$50 million in woes

Shortly after Arlinghaus assumed the leadership post in 2018, the HAC board hired an architecture, planning and consulting firm to conduct a detailed Physical Needs Assessment of its condition.

The report estimated that it would cost almost \$51 million to restore the complex to “safe, decent and sanitary” standards, with the cost of a more complete and necessary modernization estimated at over \$84 million.

Problems included structural defects such as hillside slippage, cracked foundations, deteriorated sanitary sewage lines, failing natural gas and heating pipes, inadequate storm water collection, undersized and obsolete electrical systems, deteriorated electric meter bases and conductor lines, mold, and undersized and poorly designed kitchens, bathrooms, and laundry facilities.

Arlinghaus said the report was shocking but not unexpected, given that the complex had not had a comprehensive makeover since being built in 1953, the maintenance staff had decreased to one-fourth of HUD's recommended guidelines, work on serious maintenance issues had been deferred for years, and residents' complaints were frequent and overwhelming.

"The challenges related to that deferred maintenance are real, and there was – and there is – no cost-effective way to catch up," Arlinghaus said.

A failed model

But City Heights had even more fundamental problems related to its remote location and clustered, barracks-style set-up, according to a letter from the Covington Board of Commissioners to HUD in July 2021 in support of HAC's closure application.

The complex is perched two-thirds of a mile up a steep hill at the southern end of Benton Road, isolated from the rest of Covington with only one way in and out. As a result:

- Residents have no nearby employment opportunities.
- They are far from necessary amenities like grocery stores, health care, pharmacies, and school.
- There is no long-term, sustainable access to workforce training opportunities and higher education.
- And the complex has become a mecca for drugs, crime, and frequent gun violence.

"In sum, City Heights is not integrated into the rest of the city, its fundamental flaws are simply not fixable, and no one would consent to build such a project today," the letter said.

Added Mayor Meyer: "Communities around the country have been moving away from such a housing model for decades, realizing that clustering low-income families together simply does not work. And the problems that stem with that arrangement are made even worse when those families are isolated from the rest of the community, as they are in City Heights."

Relocation

To help residents find new housing, the City (as the local governing agency) will apply for a special kind of voucher called a TPV, or tenant protection voucher. The beauty of these vouchers, Arlinghaus said, is that they can be used anywhere in the United States where vouchers are accepted, rather than just in the county in which they're issued.

For example, at least one-third of City Heights families are from Ohio and many have indicated a desire to move back closer to relatives, and these vouchers can be used for that purpose, he said.

"They're the best kind of vouchers to have," he said. "They give residents a lot of options and allow them to choose the community in which they want to live."

Arlinghaus said HAC staff will provide families with as much hands-on support as possible, hooking them up with a relocation specialist, offering counseling, and providing moving expenses as spelled out in state guidelines. The goal is to move 10 families a month, although that's "a best-case scenario," he said. Completely shuttering City Heights could take three years or longer.

As allowed by HUD guidelines, the Authority stopped filling vacancies in City Heights in April 2021.

"It's critical that families understand that they're not alone," Arlinghaus said. "But it's also critical that other communities step up. Northern Kentucky as a collective whole needs to recognize that the challenge of providing affordable housing is a regional issue and not just one for the river cities to solve."

Reinvestment

As for what happens with the land on which City Heights falls, that's an issue for years down the road, officials said.

The complex sits on 76.53 acres and will eventually be put up for sale, Arlinghaus said. As required, it was appraised in November 2020 for a little over \$6 million, with the cost of demolition factored into the appraised value. Whatever proceeds are gained from that eventual sale, HUD rules dictate how the money can be spent.

HAC's application specified four potential uses: deferred maintenance of other public housing units, a replacement maintenance facility, future purchase of land for additional public housing, and increased supportive services for remaining residents.

Officials have given little thought to the land's eventual use given the much-higher priority of improving residents' quality of life, Meyer said.

"Both elected and housing officials long before the current board members have recognized that living in City Heights is seen by many as a curse and that it simply had to go," he said. "This is a significant step in that process, and if we do it right, our families will be much better off."

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