

# Walker's Bend to be Revitalized

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COVINGTON — The city of Covington recently became the first in the state to complete its Neighborhood Stabilization Program, and now, more plans are in the works to rehabilitate the targeted neighborhood.

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The city was allocated \$428,070 in federal stimulus dollars to purchase, rehabilitate and resell foreclosed properties through the NSP and a partnership with Habitat for Humanity. The City Council agreed to give the Covington Redevelopment Authority about \$570,000 in seed money toward its overall housing initiative, for a total of \$1 million toward housing initiatives.

The Redevelopment Authority agreed that it would focus initially on Walker's Bend, where the developer and builder had gone bankrupt and left the subdivision unfinished.

More lots have been purchased in preparation for further efforts in the neighborhood, according to Planning Director Randy Vinson. In addition to the eight lots purchased through the NSP, the Redevelopment Authority has purchased 38 lots, and 31 more are targeted for purchase, Vinson said.

Plans are to partner with the Covington Housing Authority for a mixed-use development that would include apartments and commercial/retail space. Three lots near the entrance of the subdivision have been secured for that purpose.

Vinson said the design calls for three-story buildings with apartments on the upper floors and retail on the bottom. A community room, hair salon, day care and classroom that could be used for home ownership and credit repair courses are planned.

Vinson said the idea is to get the residents of the apartments qualified to purchase homes in the neighborhood, which would in turn also put builders back to work.

One of the lots in question was the subject of criticism at the City Council meeting Monday night. During the public comments section of the meeting resident Forrest Sawyer insinuated there had been unethical activity in the purchase of one of the lots by Vinson with his personal credit card.

Mayor Kim Carter acknowledged the property had been purchased by a city employee who was then reimbursed.

"He doesn't stand to profit anything. It was something he was doing out of the goodness of his heart to help us," she said, adding that the employee was reimbursed a dime less than what he spent due to an accounting error.

Vinson said Tuesday that he purchased a vacant lot that had been put up for auction because it was at the entrance of Walker's Bend and considered crucial to the success of the project. At the time, the Redevelopment Authority did not have a bank account, he said.

Vinson said he paid approximately \$6,900 for the lot and was reimbursed by the authority about six weeks later. Vinson said the property was not part of the NSP and he was not reimbursed with NSP funds. The property was purchased through Redevelopment Authority funds, he said.

"We agreed if we couldn't control the entrance, our chance of success was going to be compromised. We did not want some loose cannon to get in there," he said.

Vinson said the City Council was aware of the transaction, as it was discussed in a closed session.

Though Sawyer said Vinson's involvement looked "cloudy," Vinson said he did not make any money off the deal.

Carter said there was nothing illegal about the transaction.

"It may look cloudy to you, but it's above board," Carter said.

In addition to the lots at the entrance of the subdivision, the Redevelopment Authority has also purchased several lots along Avery and Evertt streets for single-family rental units that would have a 15-year lease-purchase agreement. Affordable Equity Partners, the same group that is developing a senior citizen complex downtown, has expressed interest in developing the property, Vinson said, but that is contingent on whether the city can buy up the additional lots it needs, which are currently owned by Lennar Homes.

Vinson said vacant lots are being purchased for about \$5,500 each.

The Redevelopment Authority will be reimbursing the city for its initial investment and will keep any profits to apply toward future projects.

The goal is to tip the balance between owner-occupied and rental homes, Vinson said, and that balance is currently in favor of owner-occupied with the completion of the first phase of the NSP.

The city has been awarded an additional \$75,000 in NSP funds that will likely be used on Walker's Bend.

"We feel like we will have a bigger impact if we can concentrate our efforts," he said.

The city will likely be eligible for more NSP money in September after the state collects the money that was not spent by local governments during the first round.

Vinson said the Walker's Bend project has already garnered the interest of the Department of Community Affairs and the University of Georgia.

"Everybody is excited about this project to use as a model for failed subdivisions," he said.