

Dreaming of new 'Gardens'

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An apartment at Gonzales Gardens comes with light bulbs and not much else.

There are no showers, only bathtubs that swirl with paint chips. Air conditioning, if you can afford it, cools from the front window when it's not shorted out because of inadequate wiring.

And privacy is whatever you are unwilling to let flap on the clotheslines in the courtyard.

This is life at the nation's thirdoldest public housing project, which hasn't changed since it first opened in 1941 save for some fresh coats of paint.

"It's better than it has been," said Robin Reese, who grew up around "the Gardens" and has lived there for three years. "Nobody breaks in people's houses. I guess because nobody sleeps. Everybody's trying to watch everybody."

Gonzales Gardens residents have watched as the Columbia Housing Authority tore down Saxon Homes, off Harden Street, and Hendley Homes, off Rosewood Drive, in recent years and replaced them with gleaming duplexes and single-family homes fronted by retail space.

Now that those two projects are nearing completion, City Councilman E.W. Cromartie has focused his attention on Gonzales Gardens and its contemporary, Allen Benedict Court on Harden. The two are the last of the dinosaurs, with a combined 524 densely built, aging units that some say make the poor poorer.

Tuesday night, nearly 60 people attended a planning session, led by an Atlanta design firm, on what a new Gonzales Gardens could look like. More than 50 people huddled around maps at the

Cecil Tillis Center off Harden Street, using magic markers to color in blocks with schools, parks and stores.

Today, people can drop by and watch as the planners work on conceptual drawings. Thursday night, the planners, Urban Collage, will package all of the comments and ideas into a formal presentation for the community.

But even with a plan, the Columbia Housing Authority still has to find the money. Housing authority officials had a design session a few years ago for Allen Benedict Court, but twice failed to receive a \$20 million federal grant that would have paid for the project.

The Allen Benedict Court plan is still waiting - which means Gonzales Gardens isn't even at the top of the list yet.

"The money is not as readily available as it used to be in the past," said Gilbert Walker, executive director of the Columbia Housing Authority. "But at least we are trying to do something to put some funding mechanisms in place."

U.S. Rep. Jim Clyburn, the third ranking Democrat in Congress, represents Gonzales Gardens and is supportive of the city's plans, according to his spokeswoman, Hope Derrick.

City officials want to use state and federal tax breaks as incentives for private developers to rebuild the Gardens, much as they did the Celia Saxon site, which replaced Saxon Homes.

Cromartie wants to take it a step further and train some Gardens residents in masonry and carpentry.

"They will be in a position to get jobs through the development of that project," Cromartie said.

Monday, Debra Washington sat in front of her Gonzales Gardens apartment, her left ankle wrapped because of arthritis. She was flipping through a copy of a weekly magazine that publishes local jail mug shots like an elderly person would leaf through the obituaries.

"Now it's mostly teenagers getting into it. They're getting out of school, and they're smelling themselves - that's what I call it," Washington said. "It's hot, they're aggravated, they don't have too much more to do, they don't have to listen to nobody, no rules or regulations, so they be smelling themselves, and they get out here and act the fool."

Washington said she doesn't want a new Gonzales Gardens to be fenced in, like a prison, but laid out in a way that would discourage people from cutting through the neighborhood and causing trouble. She'd like to see groundlevel duplexes, so she wouldn't have to take

the stairs.

Jeanine Cunningham wants the housing broken up into single-family homes so she can have more room to raise her four children and keep them isolated from the drug dealers who frequent the Gardens.

And she wants the Gardens to house all kinds of people, not just the poor.

"I would like to have it mixed so you get a variety of different people you interact with every day," she said. "At least the kids will get to see somebody who is doing good for themselves."

- Caption: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX/THE STATE Jeanine Cunningham, a Gonzales Gardens resident for two years, watches her children play.PHOTOGRAPHS BY C. ALUKA BERRY/CABERRY@THESTATE.COM Preston Gainyard, a Gonzales Gardens resident for two years, rakes his yard.
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