

HABITAT FOR HUMANITY OF GREATER CHARLOTTESVILLE

Empowering residents to drive the redevelopment of a trailer park

Habitat of Greater Charlottesville in Virginia is redeveloping a mobile home park into a financially sustainable, mixed-income, mixed-use community, with the residents leading the way. To realize a community-defined vision for redevelopment, Habitat and the residents are pushing the boundaries of the county's zoning code as residents develop the knowledge and skills needed to plan the redevelopment and advocate for themselves.

Background

The city of Charlottesville, home to the flagship campus of the University of Virginia, has become a lot more expensive in recent years. Half of its residents face unaffordable housing costs. Thousands of families are on the waiting list for housing vouchers. There is virtually no available housing in the city that is affordable to extremely low-income households.

Limited development opportunities compound the city's housing difficulties. In addition to historic districts and surrounding open space, three-quarters of the city is zoned for single-family homes. Land prices rose 800 percent in the early 2000s, nearly driving Habitat of Greater Charlottesville out of business, according to President and CEO Dan Rosensweig.

Affordable living options on the outskirts of the city are now facing pressures of their own. The Southwood Mobile Home Park is a prime example. Located two miles from the city in Albemarle County, Southwood has the largest collection of affordable housing in the region. Its 341 trailers are home to 1,500 residents, most of whom have very low incomes.

In 2007, the mobile home park came up for sale. The community's infrastructure was failing after years of deferred maintenance. Raw sewage bubbled up through the ground. Electrical fires threatened residents' safety. Habitat purchased the 120-acre community and began work on an ambitious effort to preserve and revitalize the community without displacing the residents.

In addition to one-for-one replacement of the community's affordable living spaces, Habitat committed to "cultural, economic and individual nondisplacement" while addressing a range of needs, including infrastructure, education, social services, safety, transportation, economic development and recreation. Significantly, Habitat also resolved to empower residents to be the leaders of the redevelopment.

Flexible zoning

Two flexible zoning strategies are helping Habitat and Southwood residents innovate in support of inclusive neighborhood redevelopment: planned unit development and form-based code.

- **Planned unit development** is a type of zoning district that allows for more flexibility and greater mixing of land uses than in traditional zones. It is commonly used to facilitate the master planning of large tracts of land. The developer works with the jurisdiction to prepare a site plan with a customized mix of land uses and public spaces that are presented for review as a cohesive neighborhood "unit."
- **Form-based code** refers to a relatively new zoning approach that is less prescriptive about permitted land uses than traditional zoning but more specific about the desired form of buildings, along with the location and relationship of buildings to one another and to the public realm. *Transects* in form-based codes further describe the

desired character and shape of neighborhoods. Form-based codes also regulate elements that are not typically part of zoning, such as streets, sidewalks and other public spaces.

Community-directed redevelopment

Before Habitat could build the capacity of residents to design and advocate for Southwood's redevelopment, it needed to earn the community's trust. In 2007, Habitat began stabilizing the community's infrastructure and addressing years of deferred maintenance. Habitat also brought a Boys and Girls Club and dozens of services to the community after converting a convenience store into a community center. Through these investments, Habitat started getting to know residents and forging relationships. It also demonstrated its commitment to making improvements without increasing the rent on residents' ground leases.

Habitat followed this in 2013 with an intensive "listening" process. It surveyed all 341 homes and conducted more than 100 one-to-one interviews to inquire about what residents valued most in their housing situation and neighborhood spaces, what services were supportive of their families and their way of life, and what assets they wanted to build on.

Through this process, Habitat identified nearly 100 "early adopter families" who were willing to build on the shared values that had been identified during the listening process and participate in the first stage of redevelopment planning. Habitat engaged the first planning group in a process of defining their own vision for the community's future and developing a community land use plan to realize that vision.

Throughout the planning process, Habitat sought to provide residents with "the necessary information to make intelligent decisions about the future of their community," Rosensweig says. Residents participated in a series of workshops where they learned about housing typologies, commercial space, roads and other land use issues. Residents learned about constraints on land development such as floodplains, steep slopes, and the availability and accessibility of necessary infrastructure. They also learned about opportunities, such as the impact of density on the financial feasibility of redevelopment.

Residents started with a dream of large-lot single-family homes. But as the workshops went on, residents shifted to a vision of more compact development as a strategy to achieve consensus priorities of inclusiveness and affordability. The cohort also found agreement around other land use concepts, including separating residential areas from higher-intensity businesses but allowing community centers and child-friendly amenities closer to homes.

A subgroup next worked with architects and professional planners to use Legos and more formal three-dimensional figures to translate land use principles into block-by-block concept sketches for the community. Currently, the plan envisions 650 to 800 homes at a mix of prices, with parks, community centers and affordable child care, along with ready access to additional jobs and support services.

In between each stage of plan development, resident committee members reported to the larger community. "Community Guides" also presented at various external events, including a state leaders meeting hosted by Virginia Assembly delegates.

ZONING PROPOSAL

The residents' work has resulted in a rezoning proposal to implement Phase 1 of the Southwood land use plan. Phase 1 focuses on 32 acres of undeveloped land on the southern and western sides of the community where redevelopment can be demonstrated without the need to remove trailers. Working in partnership with planners, architects, engineers and Habitat staff members, residents developed a new site plan for Southwood that employs zoning innovations not yet used in the county. This includes elements of a form-based code that delineate areas of greater and lesser development intensity, describe the desired pedestrian experience, and indicate how each place or "block" should feel. The community is also proposing minimal road widths and clustering development in a way that resembles the current clustering of trailers and protects open spaces and mature trees.

To enable these innovations, the residents and Habitat are seeking to rezone Southwood from the current (R2) low-density residential district to the county's flexible Planned Unit Development district known as the "Neighborhood Model District." The Southwood zoning proposal pushes back, however, on the district's highly prescriptive design standards, which have the potential to inhibit new development. Rosensweig says Habitat wants to "empower people to design something that would unfold more organically" than is normally possible in the county. "That's what makes places great, in our opinion."

Habitat staff members and residents have worked closely with county administrative staff to work out the details of the rezoning proposal. Residents occasionally delegated advocacy responsibilities to Habitat's staff to resolve technical details in meetings with the county, but remain active participants in developing and advocating for the overall proposal.

Residents and Habitat completed their Phase 1 rezoning proposal and submitted it to the County Planning Commission in February 2018. They are now finalizing revisions based on the commission's feedback. The revised proposal could be voted on by the Planning Commission as soon as October, leading to a final vote by the county supervisors in December. Assuming zoning is approved, development would begin by 2020. At that point, Habitat expects to begin the process of rezoning the rest of the community, with successive groups of residents helping design the remainder piece by piece.

Impact

For Rosensweig, the biggest achievement of the Southwood redevelopment process so far is that "We now have a group of folks who can advocate for themselves." As one Southwood resident says, "We're on our own path toward making our neighborhood a reality."

Habitat and Southwood residents have also created a test case for a form of flexible zoning that could become a model for other inner-ring communities outside Charlottesville that are starting to decline and redevelop. The County of Albemarle is also viewing Southwood as a pilot project that could shape how it reinvests in these types of communities going forward.

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Rosensweig adds that Southwood has the potential to be a model for sustainable and equitable redevelopment of both trailer parks and other redeveloping communities nationwide.

Lessons

- 1. Resident ownership over redevelopment is critical to success.** In Habitat's first project to preserve and revitalize a trailer park threatened by redevelopment — the Sunrise community in Charlottesville completed in 2012 — Habitat did not do as much groundwork to engage residents as in Southwood. One outcome was that the residents were not completely prepared to manage their homeowners association harmoniously going forward. "More important than the product is the process," Rosensweig says. Authentic, meaningful engagement of residents, moving from teaching to co-learning, is essential to ensuring that neighborhood revitalization is sustainable and equitable. "The people living there will take an intensive ownership of what's been done."
- 2. "Leave your assumptions about what's needed at the door."** Listening to residents' dreams, concerns and priorities has been central to engaging them in the Southwood redevelopment process. "Start with the dream, not constraints," Rosensweig says. "People in poverty often haven't been invited to dream before in a space free of constraints." As Rosensweig told a reporter in 2017, "From our perspective, a lot of what has gone wrong in redevelopment projects nationwide is when there are solutions imposed from the outside."
- 3. "It's better to get invited into a community than to jump in as a savior."** Habitat did not have a relationship with residents before purchasing Southwood to preserve its affordability and prevent displacement. This meant it took time to build trust with residents before the redevelopment process could really begin. Going forward, Habitat intends to do more to form relationships with residents before beginning work in a community.

4. **Incremental steps help build trust.** It has been helpful to phase redevelopment in Southwood and start with a small pilot project. Residents need a first village they can see and touch before fully buying into overall redevelopment plans. It is further helping build trust to start with redevelopment in a portion of the community where no homes will be affected.
5. **Participatory planning can help residents embrace more compact and affordable living options in their community.** Empowered to lead the design of their own community, and provided with the knowledge they needed to make informed decisions, Southwood's resident-planners came to the conclusion on their own that greater density and mixed-income housing were important components of achieving their vision for an inclusive and welcoming community.

Resources

- Dan Rosensweig, President and CEO, Habitat of Greater Charlottesville, drosensweig@cvillehabitat.org.
- The Southwood Story (Habitat of Greater Charlottesville): cvillehabitat.org/what-we-do/southwood.html.
- Southwood Rezoning Proposal: dropbox.com/s/akocejlusutksw/Southwood%20Phase%201%20-%20CVilleHabitat.pdf?dl=0.



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