

Features

\$29.5M grant, neighbor-focused plans boost Avondale housing revitalization efforts

Geoffrey Dobbins | Tuesday, January 15, 2013



PATRICIA MILTON

Much like thousands of people who pass through Avondale on their daily commutes, Ozie Davis III recognizes the housing challenges his neighbors face—from unemployment to crime to limited spaces for their kids to play. But these days he has more reason to feel optimistic about Avondale’s future.

In December 2012, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development announced that The Community Builders, a nonprofit housing developer, was awarded a \$29.5 million Choice Neighborhoods Implementation Grant to execute a “transformation plan” in some of Avondale’s largest affordable housing units.

As the executive director of the Avondale Comprehensive Development Corporation, Davis was one of the community partners who helped Avondale win the grant. He has high hopes for the positive impact the project will have on the neighborhood.

“This is going to raise the standard of what you do with your tenants in large, multi-family buildings,” Davis says. “We’re going to see a different level of tenant expectation of the property manager.”

The Community Builders, or TCB, will use the funds to rehabilitate five buildings in the main Reading Road corridor, including Alameda Apartments, Crescent Court Apartments, Poinciana Apartments, Maple Apartments and Somerset Apartments. Each of the buildings is at least 70 years old.

Jeff Beam, a Boston-based senior project manager at TCB, says renovations will “basically take it all the way down to the structure.” Each unit will get new windows and roofs, new plumbing and heating systems, and new kitchens and baths.

“To somebody who lives in the apartment, it will feel like a brand new unit,” says Beam, who is coordinating the project. Improved curb appeal will also help attract new investment in the community. As the five-year grant is implemented, TCB also hopes to rehabilitate vacant buildings nearby and draw new retailers, as well as a grocery store to the Avondale Town Center.

As one of the largest mixed-income housing developers in the country, TCB currently manages more than 100 properties. Their past projects include Cincinnati’s \$180 million City West development in the West End in 1998 and 1999.

Beam believes TCB can leverage that expertise into benefits for Avondale tenants.

“The types of rehabilitation we’re doing allow for something called ‘occupied rehab,’” Beam says. Instead of having to empty a building for a year or more to do full-fledged construction and then move people back in, they can work on vacant units or only move small groups of tenants for short periods of time within the neighborhood while units are being rehabbed.

“By careful management of where empty units are,” he says, “we can make it minimally disruptive in people’s lives.”

TCB is partnering with the City of Cincinnati, the Avondale Comprehensive Development Corporation, the Avondale Community Council, The Urban League, Cincinnati Public Schools, Gabriel’s Place and the Center for Closing the Health Gap, among others, for the project. The depth of these community partnerships was instrumental in successfully landing the highly competitive grant.

Coupling new public housing with programming for residents differentiates Avondale’s approach from most other rehab initiatives, Davis says. “This coordination of opportunities is not going on everywhere.”

From the very beginning, Terri Hamilton Brown, the TCB Midwest regional director spearheading the project, sought input from current residents and community leaders and pledged to include them in all of the planning.

Patricia Milton, the president of the Avondale Community Council, was glad that local leadership was the “first stop” when TCB was trying to find out if Avondale was even a good candidate for the redevelopment.

“That’s something that community councils—community groups in general—fight for; to be included at the beginning of a decision-making process,” Milton says. “Avondale is a large community, and no one entity can do this alone.”

As TCB developed the transformation plan, they asked the Avondale Comprehensive Development Corporation to survey current tenants. Large chunks of the final plan presented to HUD were based on needs the tenants expressed in those surveys. Residents said they needed to be connected with adult education programs, employment assistance, health classes and after-school programs for their children.

Each partner organization has a role to play in providing a range of services to tenants. The Avondale Comprehensive Development Corporation will coordinate all the programs for tenants, assess tenant needs and communicate them to the other partners.

CPS will use grant resources to support an artist-in-residence to expand arts and cultural programming at Rockdale Academy Elementary School and South Avondale Elementary School.

The Urban League will provide case management to help tenants tackle their employment and educational needs.

At the same time, Milton and the Avondale Community Council are tasked with making sure Avondale residents benefit from the jobs the redevelopment produces. “That’s where we can make a difference for the people who live in the community,” she says.

Davis is particularly excited about a collaboration between the Center For Closing the Health Gap and Gabriel’s Place to tie healthy living and eating with community gardening for the rehabbed properties. As more tenants are trained in gardening at Gabriel’s Place plots, they can start gardens of their own. “If we get rooftop gardens on the top of these five buildings by 2020, that would be a great success,” he says.

Davis, Beam and Milton don’t expect anyone to be moved out of their current living arrangements involuntarily. The planned redevelopment will turn the current 140 affordable housing units into at least 318, so Avondale will end up with more affordable housing units than it started with.

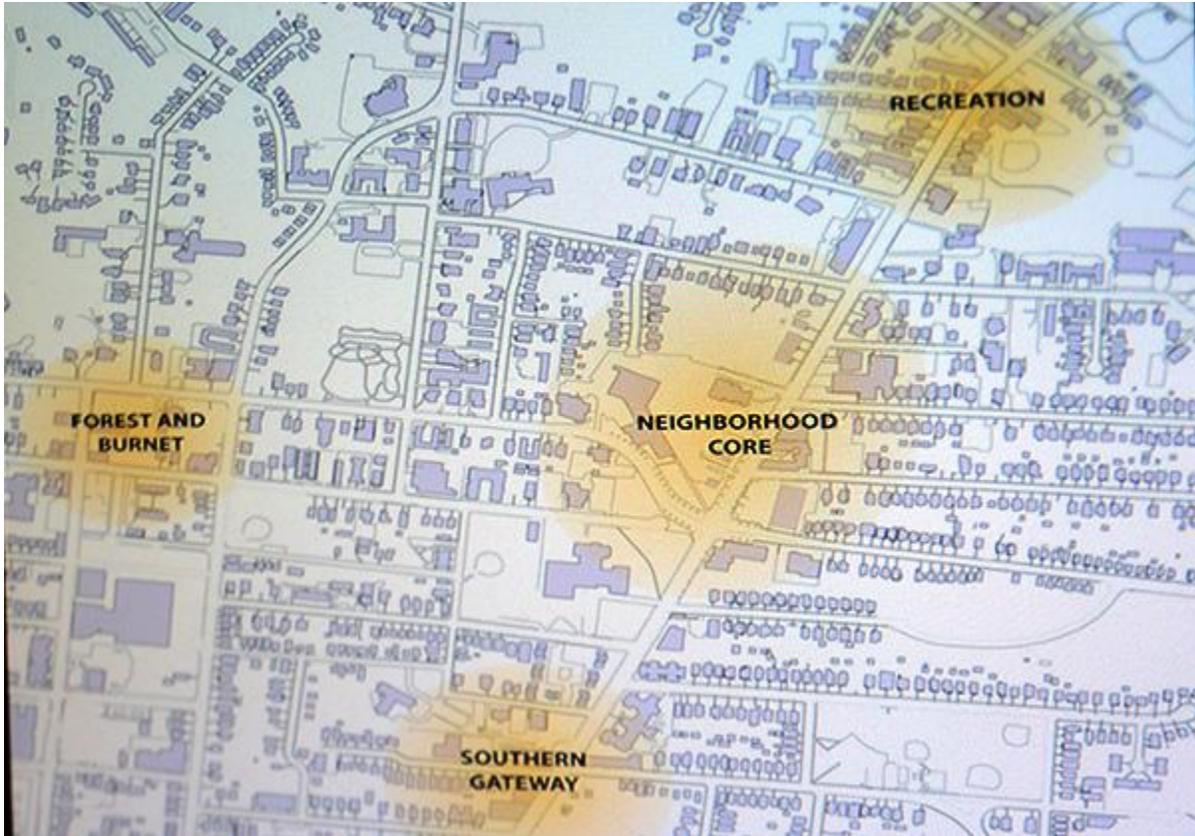
Milton says that due to the unused land in the area and the high vacancy rate—2010 census data puts it at 25 percent—there will be plenty of room for mixed-income housing without displacing current residents.

But Milton does expect to see more residents move out of public housing by choice because they no longer require housing assistance. “Our whole goal is to diversify income within this community,” she says.

“This is a real chance for community transformation,” Davis says. He admits that it is unreasonable to expect the grant to fix all of Avondale’s challenges. “But we can be on our way,” he says. “[The Choice Grant] is not the end. It’s the beginning.”

Geoffrey Dobbins, who writes regularly for Soapbox, is a freelance journalist based in Cincinnati. He learned how to write for magazines, newspapers and blogs while studying journalism at the University of Cincinnati. Between runs to the comic book shop, he's been a contributor for Cincinnati Magazine, The Nation.com, and WireTap magazine.

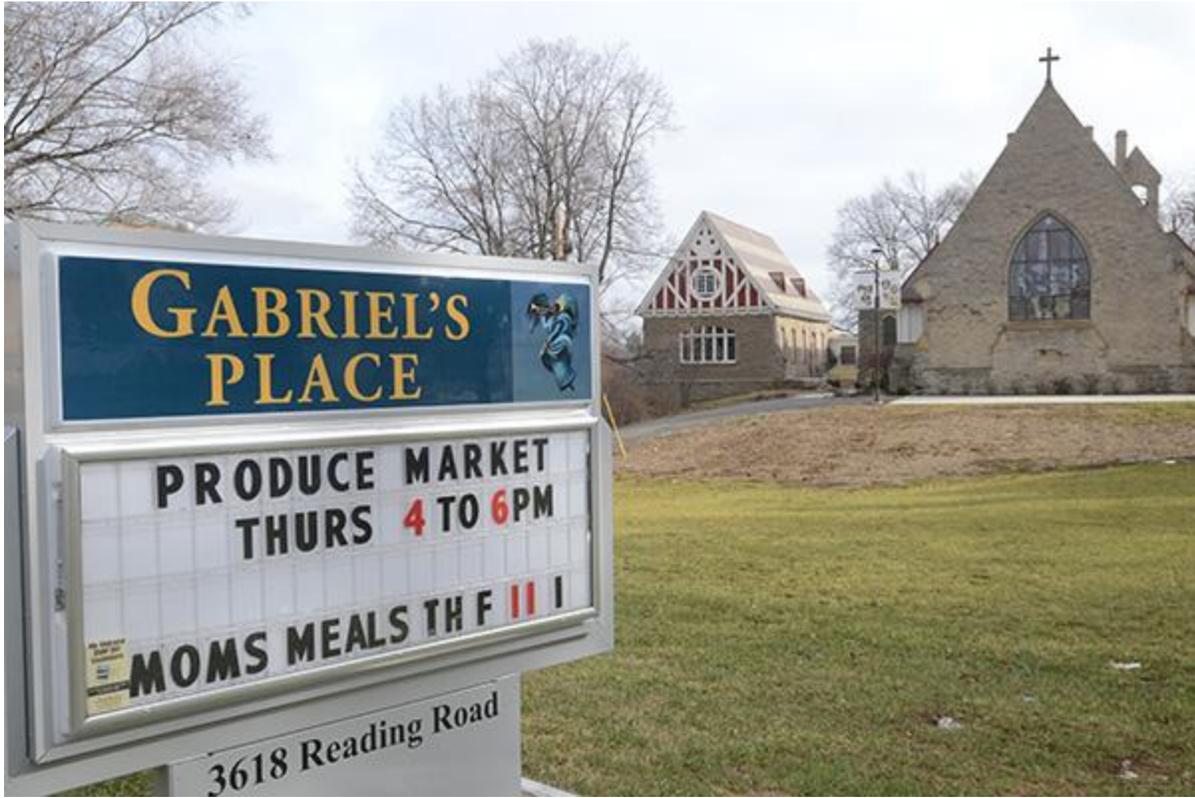
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