

December 20, 2016

Southtown Court remains in the balance

WITH RUMORS SWIRLING ABOUT THE PROJECT, THE HOUSING AUTHORITY MEETS BUT DOES NOTHING TO CLARIFY ITS FUTURE — OR THAT OF ITS RESIDENTS.



CARDELL DAVIS, CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS, ADDRESSED THE MEETING. PHOTO BY EDWARD ASHTON.

The fate of the Southtown Court housing project, slated for demolition, remains undecided after a meeting of the Birmingham housing authority Monday focused on a variety of other matters instead.

Southtown Court — also known simply as Southtown — is located on some of the city's most valuable real estate near UAB and just west of St. Vincent's Hospital and is due to be demolished and redeveloped into commercial property. Although rumors have been circulating regarding what will happen to Southtown residents, the board did not address that issue.

Instead, when the Board of Commissioners of the Housing Authority of the Birmingham District (HABD) met at the George W. McCoy Building at 1301 25th Ave. N. for their regularly scheduled monthly meeting, they talked about a new development in Oxmoor Valley called the Park at Sydney Drive and a major modernization of the authority's Freedom Manor property, a six-story building across the street from Kelly Ingram Park on Fifth Avenue North.

Some who attended the meeting expected to find out what would happen next with Southtown. It is going to be commercially developed, and a number of high-profile property developers are vying for the project. The development is large, and it sits on very desirable and valuable real estate, so there has been a great deal of public interest surrounding the future of the property.

"At the November board meeting ... we were going to have a work session with the developers who scored the highest score," said Joseph Bryant, the HABD's press representative. "They were going to meet with the board ... and at that time, if the board was satisfied, we would set a date for final approval at the December meeting. That's what everybody assumed was going to happen. ... So I think at that point ... people believed they were going to vote, but it was never put on the agenda."

Bryant added that Southtown is "a high-dollar project; a lot of companies want it; a lot of players are involved; so naturally there's a lot of interest in it."

Some members of the public who spoke at the meeting during the open comment period expressed concern, and, in some cases, a degree of suspicion, over the fact that Southtown was not on the agenda that was handed out to attendees.

Richard Dickerson, who lives with his wife in Highland Park, said that he had received a phone call that morning alerting him to come to the HABD meeting because there would be a discussion about Southtown.

“Although I don’t live in Southtown, I know some of the residents of Southtown,” said Dickerson. “And more importantly, I live in Southside, and that’s a 26-acre site, and whatever you decide to do there, we will all be impacted by it.

“So I hope that as these discussions go forward,” he continued, “there is complete and total transparency in the process: that we know who’s going to do it, how it’s going to be done, what the involvement of people of color will be. As I stand here and look across this room, this is a 74.3 percent black city, and one of the ongoing issues in this city is the ongoing failure of taxpayer money to be spent with people who look like me. It’s a problem, it’s been a problem, and it continues to be a problem.

“That is probably the most valuable real estate in this city,” Dickerson said. “It’s 26 acres, 10 minutes from the airport, five minutes from two interstates, between two major medical centers. So it is ... enormously important that everyone have an opportunity to participate.”

Reached for comment on December 20, Michael Lundy, HABD’s president and CEO, said that the board “did not put Southtown on the agenda yesterday, in part because we wanted to make sure that the full board was present for this major vote. Our vice chairman, Morrell Todd, was not able to make it to the latest meeting.

“The fact of the matter is, every official action, authorization, or deliberation we take has to be done in the public. It is not uncommon for a project of this size to be slowed to make sure all questions are answered and all participants are able to cast votes.”

In his prepared statement, Lundy said that the HABD pledges to be transparent as the project moves forward. “All approved contracts will be made public,” Lundy said. “The vote will be taken in the public. And as you witnessed yesterday, the public will continue to have to voice its opinion on HABD operations.”

There has been a rumor circulating that the authority intends to move the current residents of Southtown, once demolition and construction is ready to begin, to the abandoned Carraway Hospital at 25th Street North in the Norwood neighborhood.

This, said Bryant, is unequivocally false. “You can quote me: We are not moving people to Carraway hospital,” he said. “HABD will work to form a sensitive and practical relocation program for all residents. We are not moving people to an abandoned hospital.”



ARCHITECT NOLANDA HATCHER GAVE A PRESENTATION ON THE MODERNIZATION OF FREEDOM MANOR. PHOTO BY EDWARD ASHTON.

Despite the absence of Southtown discussion, the authority did address two large projects that the authority is handling.

One was the Park at Sydney Drive, which will be on the 2800 block of Sydney Drive in Oxmoor Valley, just off of Lakeshore Drive. “We already have an apartment complex — nobody knew it was ours, but it’s ours — out there,” Bryant said. “It’s called Glenbrook. And we own other land near Glenbrook, non-contiguous land ... and that’s where it will be.

“Hollyhand Development, L.L.C., is developing this project in partnership with the [HABD],” said Bryant. “The project is designed to be a partial replacement of units at the 500-unit Loveman Village public housing complex in Titusville.”

The project will be financed with 4 percent tax credits and will consist of 24 one-bedroom units, 48 two-bedroom units, and 48 three-bedroom units, housed in five three-story residential buildings. It is expected to cost \$9.3 million. The construction company will begin clearing ground in October, and the construction is expected to take 16 months; Bryant estimates completion of the project in April 2018.

Also, the authority plans to modernize the six-story Freedom Manor across from Kelly Ingram Park. Studio 2H Design has been contracted to design the architecture. Nolanda Hatcher, an architect with the firm, gave a presentation to the board, detailing plans which include a brand new exterior, with energy efficiency upgrades, large windows to let in natural light, and new ADA-compliant front and rear entries with automatic door openers.

The interior will also be completely renovated, again adding natural light, additional energy efficiency upgrades, a more residential feel in the common areas, and some security upgrades.

The project is estimated to cost \$4.25 million in total.