

Hitch Village being transformed into East Savannah Gateway

By [Jan Skutch](#)

The Hitch Village public housing neighborhood sat as the aging anchor on Savannah's eastside for 55 years until it was demolished in 2010 and left a largely vacant tract.

Now that tract will provide the focus for East Savannah Gateway, a planned neighborhood transformation headed by the Housing Authority of Savannah and its community partners as a renaissance of the Wheaton Street Corridor to upgrade property and people mired in long-term cycles of poverty and its related woes.

Building on past projects at Sustainable Fellwood and Ashley Midtown Hope VI, the housing authority is ready for an initiative to continue changing the face of the city's traditional public housing and her neighbors with mixed-income plats in sustainable neighborhoods.

The new proposal will emphasize support services to transform neighborhoods into places where residents can flourish — including the cradle to college-or-career concept championed by Savannah-Chatham Youth Futures Authority and community partners in the Promise Neighborhood model, better performing schools and resources and job training.

It would add increased home ownership, along with health, safety and employment services.

"It's an opportunity to do what needed to be done," Earline Wesley Davis, housing authority director since 2002, said of her agency's most ambitious undertaking to date. "Savannah has a 25 percent poverty rate, so there's definitely a need for affordable housing."

Building on success

"Hitch is the focus," Davis said.

In 2009, Davis and the authority used part of a \$5.3 million federal stimulus fund to demolish the 29-acre, 337-unit Hitch tract. They also made extensive energy-efficiency renovations to neighboring Fred Wessels Homes and its 250 public housing units.

Families living in Hitch when the demolition was approved were immediately impacted. Those 191 families were relocated as part of the plan.

In January, the authority obtained a \$300,000, two-year Department of Housing and Urban Development Choice Neighborhood planning grant targeted for the area between Bay and Henry streets and East Broad Street and Pennsylvania Avenue.

Davis said local public/private collaboration would be used to develop the plan and seek "the big check" implementation grant.

The plan will commit \$300,000 from the authority's assets, with \$569,684 in-kind funding from partners to create a plan that will include the county's total mobility plan for non-motorized transit options and a proposed street car for Wheaton Street and Waters Avenue.

It will further enhance the face of Savannah's traditional public housing neighborhoods with mixed-income tracts, building upon earlier initiatives in Garden Homes and Fellwood Homes.

But more than simply a housing authority project, it will marry support from such governmental groups as the city of Savannah and Chatham County, Chatham Area Transit and the Chatham-Savannah Metropolitan Planning Commission. Also, the Savannah-Chatham Board of Education, Savannah State University and Savannah Technical College, are considered "critical and essential" to the ultimate outcome, said Rosalyn Truitt, director of development services at the housing authority.

"We hope they will take ownership of the plan," Truitt said.

She also hopes community residents will support the plan and become "advocates for various parts of the plan."

Regardless, Davis said, "we're moving ahead."

The effort joins earlier initiatives by the housing authority and city of Savannah. Those include:

- Ashley Midtown Hope VI, a \$55 million, 364-unit project on East Anderson Street;
- Sustainable Fellwood, a \$60 million, 320-unit project off West Bay St.;
- Savannah Gardens, a \$100 million, 550-unit tract on Pennsylvania Avenue.

Davis and HUD officials who visited Savannah April 17 to review the progress agreed that federal money will not be enough to see the project to conclusion.

Part of the transformation plan being prepared will include some as-yet-undetermined estimates of what it will cost to fund the entire project, Davis said.

That plan also will address future renovations of the Blackshear public housing neighborhood on Wheaton Street when additional funds are available.

Bricks and mortar

Truitt, a 10-year authority veteran, headed the effort using HOPE VI funding from 2000-2010 that transformed the Garden Homes into the gleaming Ashley Midtown on Park Avenue.

It then moved into parts of the adjoining Benjamin Van Clark neighborhood, where about three dozen of the 70 lots involved were demolished and rebuilt.

“We saw HOPE VI as bricks and mortar,” Truitt said. “Choice Neighborhood is people as well.”

Stephanie Cutter, assistant city manager for administrative and community services, said the city’s participation in the planning grant is part of its commitment to provide affordable housing for families in need to ensure a good quality of life.

The Choice Neighborhood planning grant will allow the city to work with the housing authority and other community partners to bring the voices to the table “and talk about what makes a community,” she said.

“We will engage the community and ask them how do you see your community?” Cutter said. “It is about desires of the people, then it’s about bricks and mortar” — making houses people are proud to call home, then make the home into a community.

She cited the city’s lead role in the \$100 million Savannah Gardens project in east Savannah with CHSA Development Inc. as an example of city officials’ vision of quality, affordable housing.

Schools as centerpiece

The project will encompass two public housing areas — Hitch Village and Fred Wessels — with plans for a third — Blackshear — and four low-performing public schools, Spencer, East Broad and Shuman elementary schools and Savannah High School.

Savannah-Chatham schools Superintendent Thomas Lockamy Jr. supports that effort.

“I think it is an opportunity to work with the city and housing authority to provide the services needed for the children,” he said. “You’ve really got to make the school the centerpiece.”

He sees it as a core for a community gathering place and a mecca for support services.

“You get a better-educated child the more you can involve the school in the community ... You’ve got to educate the whole child.”

It will also bring early childhood development and transportation opportunities currently lacking on the eastside, which Davis sees as key to the venture.

In fact the Choice Neighborhood plan stemmed from the authority’s effort to obtain HOPE VI funds from HUD. Choice Neighborhood funds replaced HOPE VI, and when funds became available, the housing authority went after them, Davis said.

“It gives us an opportunity to do what needed to be done and address the families to have the positive outcomes we are seeking,” Davis said.

Public housing, which once targeted the lowest of the low income, has given way in large part to affordable housing, in part because of economic necessity.

“Affordable housing now must compete with market rate housing,” Truitt said. “We no longer want affordable housing to be less attractive.”

It is not a “cookie-cutter approach,” Davis said, pointing to new Fellwood Homes tract that includes public housing, low-income housing and home ownership

“We will try to preserve the historical significance of the area,” Davis said.

Otis Johnson, former Savannah mayor and long a leading voice in community building initiatives, said the plan responded to an area of the city that has been “neglected for a long time,” as well as an opportunity to have more mixed-income residential neighborhoods.

“This is a step forward in what we call community building where the people are the center of the activity and the bricks and mortar simply respond to the needs of the people,” Johnson said.

Promise Neighborhood model

In many ways the Choice Neighborhood mirrors the U.S. Department of Education’s Promise Neighborhood plan championed by the Youth Futures Authority in the last couple of years with its birth-to-college or career pipeline of services.

The Housing Authority was at the table with Youth Future’s failed attempts to win Promise Neighborhood planning grants and Truitt sees the new initiative as a plus for Youth Futures on any future grant initiative.

“It really is overlap in terms of the neighborhoods being served,” Truitt said, noting that many communities have both Promise and Choice neighborhood programs.

Johnson agrees, seeing as an opening for Savannah to “really develop a unique model using the choice neighborhoods and promise neighborhood concept in one area so that you join two major federal initiatives and it gets back to the responding to the needs of people and families.”

Edward Chisolm, executive director at Youth Futures, welcomes the initiative, viewing it as another way to address the needs of the area, its families and children.

The Promise Neighborhood plan targeted two, high-poverty census tracts in east Savannah in hopes of addressing cradle to college issues for children and families.

“Some of those who would be served in each plan would come from outside of the boundaries,” Chisolm said.

“Based on that we are taking another serious look in their (education department) recently released third planning and implementation Promised Neighborhood grants,” Chisolm said.