

BROWNSVILLE

Restoring Brownsville is an ongoing project

■ The residents of Brownsville, west of Liberty City, are steadily working to improve the neighborhood.

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Vacant lots and boarded-up homes still dot the neighborhood around Jefferson Reaves Sr. Park. But so do newly renovated and occupied homes, signs of improvement in the Brownsville neighborhood.

The neighborhood, north of the Airport Expressway along 27th Avenue in unincorporated Miami-Dade County, was originally a settlement for white families in the 1920s.

Blacks began moving into the neighborhood as segregation began to weaken in the late '40s, and by the mid-'60s, Brownsville was a thriving community for black professionals. But the neighborhood slowly deteriorated over the decades as more families moved away.

Over the past eight years, residents started pushing for revitalization efforts to restore Brownsville after years of neglect left some homes in a dilapidated state.

Residents like Isabella Rosete moved to Brownsville five years ago because of its affordable housing options.

"More than five years ago, the prices were really high for property, so this was the only thing that I could find," said Rosete, part of a growing number of Hispanics now living in the predominantly black neighborhood. "And I really feel a lot of potential in this property. Here, every house has its own character, and I like that."

Everett Stewart has been a resident of Brownsville since 1952 and has been



PHOTOS BY DANIEL BOCK/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

CHALLENGES: An abandoned house, above, sits next to an occupied single-family home on NW 51st Street. At right, trash piles up at an empty lot.



president of its Neighborhood Civic Association since 1993. He has been around long enough to see the community undergo a series of changes and said the area has a more negative reputation than it deserves; a situation that's causing residents to rally together.

"I came out here with the will of going out there and trying to make the community better, because I know that if you come out here and you see the potential, you might find it nice," said Rosete.

"If you look in the community, you'll see that it's not that bad," Stewart said. "But we want as much of new buildings that we can get in the community."

In 2003, the city of Miami organized the Model City/Brownsville Charrette, a workshop to solicit suggestions for Brownsville's restoration. Residents called for more affordable housing to be brought to the area.

That's a goal that the Neighborhood Housing Services of South Florida, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting responsible homeownership and providing affordable housing, hopes can be solved in the near future.

The organization has

been working on several projects over the past six years to increase the value of the community. One of those projects, its annual Paint and Beautification Day, helped repaint and landscape 15 area homes in March with help from Citizens for a Better South Florida. It also provides homebuyer workshops to educate residents on buying homes and avoiding foreclosures.

As part of the 2009 stimulus package, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development allocated \$3.92 billion in emergency assistance to state and local governments to acquire and redevelop foreclosed properties that would become abandoned if left alone.

Neighborhood Housing has purchased a home in the Brownsville area, and plans to buy nine more through money it received from the emergency fund. The houses will be sold for their appraised value after renovation, but Arden Shank, CEO of Neighborhood Housing, said that ideas are still being considered to address the empty lots.

"There still are a lot of vacant lots there, and vacant lots mean illegal activity. Trash being dumped, drug stuff going on, the informal

car repair — plus, there's trash piling up," said Shank. "But it's a better neighborhood than people think it is. Becoming a new owner there or maintaining your home is a reasonable, achievable thing to do in that neighborhood."

Carlisle Development Group, meanwhile, is building low-income apartments on what used to be a parking lot for the Brownsville Metrorail stop and is now the Brownsville Transit Village.

A partnership with Miami-Dade County allowed the Carlisle Group to build a four-phase apartment complex that will create about 400 rental units and townhouses upon completion, while allowing the county the ability to retain ownership of the land. The lion's share of the project's \$107 million cost will come from federal tax credits.

Two towers with one- and two-bedroom apartments will be available for seniors only, while the others would have up to three bedrooms for families, said Najee Coverson of the Carlisle Group.

To qualify to rent, households can earn no more than 60 percent of the area median income, which works out

to about \$41,400 for a family of four. Rent for a one-bedroom will range from \$246 to \$776, \$512 to \$931 for a two-bedroom, and \$592 to \$1,077 for a three-bedroom, depending on family size and income.

Two of the four phases will be completed in August, Coverson said.

Yet, for all of the new developments coming to the area, concerns still abound over the crime rate, which tends to be more active as you head south of the neighborhood past 46th Street.

Drug use is still rampant, and a few robberies have been reported in the past two weeks. It's so much of a problem that it was first on the agenda during the neighborhood association's June 9 meeting.

Benji Power, Neighborhood Housing's revitalization planner, said the area's crime rate is declining but that it is sometimes grouped with criminal incidents in nearby Liberty City. Power said Neighborhood Housing

has made significant progress in empowering residents to help change the neighborhood's image by encouraging more homeownership and property renovation, and preventing foreclosures.

"We're really trying to make a model here of how to stabilize a neighborhood," said Power. "A model needs to be followed so we can systematically go from neighborhood to neighborhood and identify the good. Point out the positives first, but don't be shy to admit some of the issues your neighborhood has; and try to find solutions and be open to having something new come in."

Seeing Brownsville in a new light is how Arden hopes potential residents will embrace the value of this community.

"That it becomes a neighborhood of choice. That people live there because they want to be there, not because it's the only place they can afford."