

Residents of sinking houses move out, move on

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DELRAY BEACH — Sharon Josey Rawlins doesn't miss the cracked walls and the sloping carport at the home she bought in 1985 in a small section of Carver Square. But she does miss the house.

"I had a lot of good memories in that house," she said of the first house she ever bought.



*Eliza Gutierrez/The Post
Homes on Southwest Second*

Unfortunately, the happy times the single mom spent watching her two girls grow up in that house were mixed with worries of the house falling apart. Most of her neighbors had the same fear.

The land on which the homes were built was once an illegal dumping ground and has been sinking since the 1980s, causing extensive structural damage to the houses.

But those days are long gone for Josey Rawlins, who moved into a house she built four blocks away, with the help of the city's Community Redevelopment Agency.

It took two long and complicated years, but the CRA helped move the residents in a two-block section of Carver Square that's bordered by Southwest Eighth and Sixth avenues and Southwest Second Court and Southwest Third Street. The CRA spent about \$1.6 million to buy the 12 homes and eight empty lots in that section of the neighborhood, which was built in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

"We don't want anyone living in substandard housing," said Elizabeth Butler, CRA marketing and grants coordinator.

The city used eminent domain to acquire six of the vacant lots, but it did not use eminent domain to buy any of the occupied homes.

Josey Rawlins said she was paid \$120,000 for her old home and she paid \$180,000 for her new one. She moved out toward the end of April, which was the moving deadline given by the CRA in 2005, when it decided to buy the houses and move the residents.

The next phase is demolition. Once the soil conditions are corrected, the CRA plans to build 20 affordable single-family homes. The Community Land Trust, a private nonprofit organization

that builds and sells affordable housing, has title to the land. Habitat for Humanity will be involved in the redevelopment, Butler said.

"There is a big push to see more affordable housing and workforce housing in the city," Butler said. "The redevelopment of this land is a great thing."

The story of Carver Square had a happy ending for Josey Rawlins and others like her, but it was difficult living there.

The oldest parts of the neighborhood were established in 1952. The section Josey Rawlins lived in was built on land where there was a pond and where garbage and yard waste were dumped illegally in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Rather than clear the land and build a solid foundation, it was filled with sand.

The homes began having structural problems as the foundations shifted in the loose fill. Roofs buckled, concrete blocks shifted and ceilings cracked. The homes were sinking.

Residents began complaining and asking the city for help. The city's initial response was that it was a private matter that should be taken up with the developer.

City officials maintained that the city was not liable for the problems because builders were not required to perform soil tests before being issued permits to build homes. The rules have since changed.

In 2003, the CRA decided to help the Carver Square residents move.

In 2005, the agency started giving the occupants \$15,000 for moving expenses. Renters received up to \$2,500 per household.

Some residents qualified for an additional \$25,000 if they agreed to build or buy a new home in the CRA district. Up to \$40,000 in interest-free loans were available to some who could not afford the mortgage on a new home. Residents were allowed to stay in the homes rent-free until April 28 while new houses were being built.

Josey Rawlins credits Community Land Trust executive director Joe Gray with helping her get through the process.

"He was the one that told me everything was going to be all right," she said. "He was right."

Now she lives next door to her parents in a new, three-bedroom home. She chose the location so she could keep a closer eye on her ailing parents.

"This house is bigger and I'm trying to enjoy it," she said. "I loved my old house. It's just going to take a little while to get used to the new one."