





# Scattered-Site Plans Come Together

*Atlanta-based Columbia Residential defies the odds and gives residents sustainable, high-quality housing along with the support and services they may not get elsewhere.*

BY RAY KUNIAISKY

Columbia Residential, an Atlanta-based affordable housing developer, is embarking on a fairly new venture: Building on the award-winning success of its contiguous affordable housing communities, the firm is launching a new scattered-site initiative close to its existing Columbia Mechanicsville (Ga.) property.

Affordable housing has come a long way since the 1930s and '40s, when America built homogeneous public housing that devolved into centralized crime zones so dangerous that even the police were hesitant to enter. Columbia Residential is one of a few pioneers of a new model of affordable housing, where "projects" are torn down and replaced with beautiful, quality, LEED-certified mixed-income communities.

Simply defined, a scattered site is an array of single-family homes dispersed in a designated area that are overseen by a single property management firm. The funding for this initiative comes from the Low Income Housing Tax Cred-

it coupled with the Neighborhood Stabilization Program, legislation enacted to address the recent economic crisis sparked by the housing industry downfall.

Its goal is to purchase, rehabilitate and re-occupy targeted

homes throughout the country. This scattered site in the Mechanicsville neighborhood will include an area of approximately a mile in the shadow of Turner Field, the home stadium of Major League Baseball's Atlanta Braves that began as the stadium for the 1996 Olympics.

The site is a patchwork of blighted homes hit by the foreclosure crisis and blocks of vacant land, in which Columbia Residential and its partners will build some new homes and renovate other existing homes, with all the new residences being 100 percent affordable housing.

These new communities have proven so successful in their revitalization of distraught areas, the state of Georgia and city of Atlanta has asked to partner with Columbia Residential, SUMMECH CDC and the Atlanta Housing



The interior of a residence pre-rehabilitation. (Opposite page) A newly revitalized apartment.



Columbia Residential seeks to maintain the original beauty of a community while incorporating green building design.

Authority to further improve the Mechanicsville community.

One such example is the Atlanta-based Retreat at Edgewood. The Retreat sits on the former site of Edgewood Housing Apartments, which was demolished in 2008. This community is near downtown and Interstate 20, and is accessible by MARTA transportation lines.

Columbia Residential, the City of Atlanta and the Zeist Foundation partnered to restore the Edgewood neighborhood to its original beauty while incorporating green building design. Columbia Residential's Retreat at Edgewood is townhome apartment homes clustered throughout the Edgewood neighborhood.

Retreat at Edgewood is a LEED Gold certified, mixed-income affordable housing and multifamily community. The community provides quality affordable housing in an "in-town," walkable and transit-oriented environment.

Amenities include a community room, fitness center, business center, library, outdoor picnic pavilion and playground. The community sought to (and succeeded) fill the need of quality affordable housing in an otherwise historically low-income neighborhood.

This property added 100 units of affordable housing to the neighborhood. It removed the primary blight from the area and replaced it with high-quality townhomes that look like a for-sale product. There are more than 90 children living at the property with supportive services provided by Families First. A Project-Based Rental Assistance (PBRA) award from the

Atlanta Housing Authority was used on 40 percent of the units—specifically the 50 percent Area Median Income (AMI) units.

## Return to Greatness

Additionally, the project-based rental assistance on this development allowed a portion of qualified residents from the demolished property to return to the site and continue to participate in the community programs delivered by Whiteford Community Program.

Many of those residents are at 30 percent AMI or below—PBRA is critical for allowing for some portion of tenancy at very low income. With the link between safe and adequate housing and well being becoming ever so apparent, a project like this was imperative to the families of the community.

Neighborhoods of concentrated poverty and inadequate housing often lack the support, service and opportunities that residents need to reach their full potential. This project seeks to defy the odds and give residents sustainable quality housing along with the support and services they may not get elsewhere.

This scattered-site provided stable housing for this well-deserving community, and created a platform for connecting people to services and resources. The collapse of the housing market resulted in the loss of family and neighborhood assets, increased crime, decreased property values and a rise in housing instability, and this neighborhood stabilization effort brought the stability back by combating the lack of affordable housing that led to rent burdens, overcrowding, substandard housing and, ultimately, an economically stressed community.

Encouraged by increased income and reduced crime in the Mechanicsville community, the governments believe the new urban experiment can extend the success to clusters of mostly aging—and some that will be new—homes that will encompass the scattered site.

Columbia Residential's plan to increase the value of the existing homes and the neighborhood will be watched closely by housing experts across the country who bet that the positive benefits from the existing Columbia Mechanicsville communi-



Columbia Residential's scattered site calls for the removal of blight and decay.





Columbia Residential's Retreat at Edgewood, Atlanta

ty—comprised of quality-built residences in a multifamily community—will extend past its walls and into the new scattered site.

## Deserving Communities Prosper


There are challenges to managing a scattered-site property that will have to be more closely monitored, but Columbia Residential is fit for the difficult task and believes that this initiative will have a positive impact on a deserving community.

The homes being purchased were either built in the 1920s or between 1994 and 2004. Average hard construction cost per unit, new or renovated, is expected to be \$95,000. Initial challenges that Columbia Residential and its partners have faced include negotiating short sales with current homeowners and their lenders, targeting clusters of homes as potential additions to the site and negotiating with homeowners trying to make opportunistic profits.

Columbia Residential was not able to make any of the short-sale opportunities happen because of the lengthy time involved working between the bank and the seller. The company came across a few HUD foreclosures and a few homes owned and marketed by Fannie Mae that it was able to acquire at reasonable prices.

For homes that had had sellers with unrealistic expectations, Columbia Residential did not accept their counter offers. The majority of the homes being purchased are from individuals who invested in the neighborhood during the pre-2007 boom times that now just want to sell.

Despite the challenges, Columbia Residential believes it has partnered with the right organizations and has the track record to see it through the long term.

It's not going to be easy, but contributing to the success of building communities is why Columbia Residential's employees go to work each morning to face the challenges—and opportunities—presented at each property. 



*Ray Kuniansky is Vice President Development and Operations, Columbia Residential.*

# THE GREEN CHOICE



THE MARKET LEADER SINCE 1994

OXO-BIODEGRADABLE LITTER PICK UP BAGS

ENVIRONMENTALLY CONSCIOUS PRODUCTS

WORLD CLASS CUSTOMER SERVICE

"The GREEN Solution to Dog Pollution!"



"The Clean Solution to Dog Pollution!"

800-364-7681

www.DOGIPOT.com