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NEWS

# Residents like the changes they're seeing

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On a Thursday evening in September, a couple of days before the newly renovated Cleveland Park opened, residents of the surrounding neighborhood gathered under a picnic shed for sandwiches and a sneak-peek at the park, courtesy of the Spartanburg County Parks and Recreation Department.

The park, as the group was told, is expected to be a showplace for all of Spartanburg County.

So far, it seems to be just that. In the first six weeks after the park reopened, patrons purchased more than 2,500 one-dollar tickets to ride the children's train, according to parks director Jeff Caton, while the \$2 million events center has attracted hundreds of visitors for wedding receptions, reunions and other shindigs.

But that park and those residents have a special relationship.

It's their neighborhood that adjoins the park. And it's their community whose fortunes have seemingly risen and fallen as the park has gone through its own high points and low points.

Cleveland Park was once an attraction for families throughout Spartanburg, a place where kids learned to swim and families enjoyed picnics and walks around the lake.

In those days, the tree-lined streets of the Cleveland Park neighborhood were considered quiet and safe. Most of the houses were well kept, occupied by owners who took pride in their appearance.

The bars along Howard Street going north -- still a trouble spot, according to some - - could get a little rough. But, mostly, Cleveland Park had all the components of a classic American neighborhood. Not the least of which was the park itself.

Things began to change -- inside the park and out -- decades ago.

As older residents died, their children sold off their homes. "Over the years it became more and more rental property," said longtime neighborhood resident Bill McKinney.

Construction of the Northside Apartments, a public housing project, introduced a densely housed population of renters. Like housing projects nationally, the mix of poverty and transience at Northside spawned apathy and, at times, violence.

Meanwhile, the park began to show

signs of age while gaining a reputation for crime. By the mid-1980s, it had become a haven for drugs and prostitution.

As she munched on a cookie and kept an eye on her great-grandson Jaiquez, Katherine Lyles talked that September evening about the things Cleveland Park and its neighbors have been through together.

"It was real bad," said Lyles, recalling the park's reputation as a place to pick up prostitutes and score drugs.

The surrounding streets were full of cars and noise and vice, said Lula Rice.

"Just put it like this: It seemed like they used the street to sell drugs," she said. "I saw them shooting up. There were young people in the streets - and drugs and guns and everything else."

Whether lawlessness in the park spilled over into the neighborhood or the other way around, this much seems to be true: the entire section of town during the 1980s and early 1990s had fallen on hard times.

County Council's decision to revitalize Cleveland Park was not made with only Lyles, Rice and their neighbors in mind. The council sees the park as an attraction for all of Spartanburg County and a building block for future parks and recreation development.

Likewise, these residents know that the renovation of Cleveland Park isn't the sole factor in the quality of life in the neighborhood. A combination of other projects - community policing, housing rehabilitation and the formation of a strong residents' association - have played important parts in reducing crime and rejuvenating community pride.

Still, as McKinney put it, "(The park) can't do anything but help."

And the neighborhood association is doing its part to help the park: At the grand re-opening on Sept. 21, McKinney presented a check for \$1,100. The association raised the money with a yard sale and proceeds from a book the association put together, "Memories of Cleveland Park."

When things looked their worst, it may have seemed as if memories were all longtime Cleveland Park residents had going for them.

Some left for newer, more stable neighborhoods.

Others stayed. And fought back.

Phoebe Goolsby has lived in Cleveland Park since 1949. She remembers when it was "a beautiful place" to raise a family.

In 1983 she and her recently retired husband, Laurin, a World War II veteran, moved to the coast. Upon returning three years later, Goolsby found that her neighborhood "had gotten much, much worse."

As she recalled, "Prostitutes had nearly taken over the neighborhood. They were everywhere."

Goolsby and her friend Carrie Alley, who was later murdered in her home on Asheville Highway, requested a meeting with City Council.

"I made a speech and the whole neighborhood turned out," Goolsby recalled. Her message to the council members was radical but to the point: If the city couldn't clean up the park, neighborhood residents would prefer for the land to be returned to the Cleveland family.

The city agreed to help, and did, according to Goolsby.

But the community activists didn't rely on the police to act alone.

Goolsby said that upon her and Alley's request, the Herald-Journal printed the names of prostitutes' clients arrested after a police operation at the park.

Determined to take the embarrassment-as-deterrent strategy a step further, Goolsby took the matter into her own hands.

"We had bought a (video) recorder," she recalled. "People in the neighborhood would call and say, 'There's stuff going on in the park.' I'd put the camera in the car and go over there. When they would see me, they would take off and run."

Even with prostitution on the run, the Cleveland Park neighborhood was marred by drugs, violence and dilapidated housing.

The city responded with a two-pronged attack that many believe has been a success.

Police chief Tony Fisher, who arrived in town in 1995, brought with him the concept of community policing. The idea: law enforcement is more than responding to incidents of crime. Officers who get to know the people they serve and gain their trust will have a better chance of solving - or, better yet, preventing - crime.

Cleveland Park residents can see the difference.

"It used to be that they would drive through in their air-conditioned patrol cars with the windows rolled up, driving 35 miles per hour in a 30 mile per hour zone. We didn't know who was on duty, and they didn't know us," said Lewis Parker.

"It's a matter of trust. People aren't going to talk to a stranger in a uniform."

Working with residents is part of the solution; law enforcement officials believe that blighted conditions attract criminals. Using state and federal grants, the city has begun to turn its attention to the problem of sub-standard housing in Northside and Cleveland Park.

On a ride through the community, City Housing Services Manager Martin Livingston pointed out a variety of completed and ongoing projects.

\*The city has purchased, fixed up and sold through a low-interest loan program half a dozen houses along Howard Street and nearby blocks.

\*Just east of Northside Apartments, the city is working with private developers to construct about 40 single-family homes. Low-income residents will have the opportunity to buy the homes with state-funded low-interest loans.

\*An Atlanta-based firm has redeveloped the old Fremont Elementary School, a neighborhood landmark that sat vacant for years, as apartments for low-income renters.

\*Throughout the neighborhood, city codes inspectors are working to identify badly decaying and vacant structures for demolition.

Public Safety officer Chris Banks, who works in the Cleveland Park community, believes the city's strategy is a good one. "If housing becomes derelict it will attract the criminal element," he said. "The city's approach is just removal of the problem."

The Spartanburg Housing Authority has had the ability to control the physical conditions of Northside Apartments, but, according to some, it hasn't always

exercised control over its tenants. That, too, has changed, according to Banks, thanks to new leadership in the agency.

"Northside used to be rough," he said. "In the old days, they would let (criminals) stay over there. But they've gotten rid of them. Things have gotten better over time."

Meanwhile, a neighborhood association established in the mid-1990s by Stop the Violence has raised awareness about public safety issues and promoted a sense of unity among residents. "They don't tell us what we ought to do, but help us to work out our problems together," said McKinney.

All this, says Fisher, has resulted in lower crime statistics in recent years in the Northside and Cleveland Park community.

He believes the renovations to the park will help that trend. "Criminals have a sense of territory," Fisher said. "One of the overriding concepts of law enforcement is that criminals don't want to occupy space as active, law-abiding citizens. A place that is a clean, well-kept and orderly environment is not likely to be a place for crime."

The Cleveland Park and Northside community has bounced back, but turbulence remains.

At Thursday's picnic, Lula Rice noted parts of the neighborhood where she believes conditions continue to lag behind: the houses along Amelia Street, a section running from the park over to Howard Street that Banks pointed to as the scene of recent prostitution arrests.

"I tell you - that place needs to be cleaned up," said Rice. "They need to do a lot of work."

C.T. Oakman, who owns several properties along Amelia Street, said he works to maintain his properties and has joined the Cleveland Park/Northside neighborhood association because "you need to be (aware) of what's going on with your property."

Oakman said he wasn't aware of prostitution at his property but added, "There will always be prostitutes."

Nearby Rookard Court is home to a quadraplex that Livingston said has been recently cited for code violations. Appraisers in the county assessors office have rated the cinder block structure "unsound."

Property owner Harold Foster said the property was in good condition when he bought it but has since fallen prey to bad tenants. "The problem is that anything you put in there they steal it," he said. "You've got dope addicts, alcohol addicts running loose over there. Prostitutes and everything else."

Foster claims he's lost money on the property most years and would love for the city to take buy it out from under him. So far, he said, the city hasn't been interested.

For Foster to sell it, numerous upgrades would be necessary. "It would cost more to fix it than I could get," he said.

To Sheila Dogan, who works for Stop the Violence in the neighborhood, nearby residents shouldn't have to bear the brunt of Foster's bad investment. "What he needs to do is tear the thing down," she said.

Jeff Caton hopes renovations to Cleveland Park will shine a spotlight on the good things going on the surrounding neighborhood. But he also hopes the park will bring to light some of the bad.

He said the county cut some trees at one end of the park for the purpose of exposing conditions on Amelia Street. The hope, Caton said, is that landlords will be embarrassed to have dilapidated property sitting near a beautiful and much-visited park.

At the same time that Caton hopes the park might help clear out some of the criminal element, it is already helping to attract new homeowners.

Jason Huesman recently bought a two-bedroom home on North Cleveland Park Drive. The house offers a view of the Cleveland Park lake - a selling point to Huesman, who is convinced that the park will bolster property values along nearby streets.

"I feel ... that this neighborhood is going to continue to move in the right direction," he said in September.

Longtime resident and neighborhood activist Phoebe Goolsby is 79 and now fighting a personal battle against cancer. She said she has no plans of letting disease beat her, boasting that it's her nature to fight.

The Cleveland Park community is a testament to her fighting spirit and her past triumphs - organizing residents, exposing prostitution, standing behind her community when it might have been easier to leave.

"(My husband) said he didn't go to Iwo Jima fighting to save this country only to come home and be run out of his neighborhood. We love this area, and we are delighted that it is being improved."

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