

ISSUES

SHIMBERG CENTER FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING

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Belmont Heights Estates: A HOPE VI Success Story

The Genesis of Belmont Heights Estates

Belmont Heights Estates is a revitalization effort of the Housing Authority of the City of Tampa (THA) funded through the federal HOPE VI program and other sources, including substantial private sector investment. It began with the demolition of 1,300 distressed public housing units at College Hill Homes (College Hill) and Ponce de Leon Courts (Ponce de Leon) as shown in Figure 1. These former public housing sites exemplified a community faced with blight and despair. The housing structures themselves were beyond repair, presented a lead-based paint hazard to children and offered little accessibility for persons with disabilities. The obsolete site design of these public housing units cut residents off from the surrounding neighborhood, further exacerbating conditions of poverty and crime. The following is a success story!



Figure 1. College Hill Homes and Ponce de Leon Courts prior to Demolition

Belmont Heights Estates (BHE) was created by THA and community partners as part of a new vision to transform blight and despair into hope and opportunity in East Tampa. This vision included blending different income levels harmoniously into a mix of new housing options for diverse family types. The intention was to eliminate the boundaries of traditional public housing and create linkages with the surrounding community, thereby leading the way to expanded opportunities and economic prosperity for residents and the East Tampa community as a whole.

With the goal of gaining community input and building consensus, THA established a HOPE VI Community Task Force (formerly known as the HOPE IV Steering Committee). The Task Force served in an advisory capacity and assisted with the development of the HOPE VI Revitalization Plan, the HOPE VI Community and Supportive Services Work Plan, and the Belmont Heights Estates Admissions and Occupancy Policy. The Task Force included representatives of 29 different organizations and agencies, providing a broad cross-section of the local community.

Community

The Belmont Heights Estates development transformed two distressed public housing properties built between 1941 and 1952 into an award-winning community. (See Figure 2) To date, the Belmont Heights Estates Community has won awards from the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials, American Association of Architects, American Association of Public Administrators Suncoast Chapter, Hillsborough County City-County Planning Commission, and Florida Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials.



Figure 1. Belmont Heights Estates



Figure 2. Amenities at Belmont Heights Estates

Belmont Heights Estates

The Belmont Heights Estates development won these awards by replacing the old military barracks-style concrete block public housing units with modern new homes. These homes feature metal frame construction, UV double-paned sound barrier windows, hardy board and stucco siding, wall-to-wall carpeting, computer workstations, new appliances, tile floors, chemical treatment of grounds and pest control. The new neighborhood shown in Figure 3 used multiple designs and colors to allow it to blend with the surrounding community (unlike the previous single-color, barracks-style public housing, which is easily identified in any inner-city neighborhood as public housing). It also preserved existing trees where possible, enhancing the appeal and safety of private and public spaces.

Analyzing the Impact of Belmont Heights Estates

THA enlisted the services of the University Partnership for Community & Economic Development (University Partnership), which includes the Shimberg Center for Affordable Housing, in an effort to objectively measure the economic impact of Belmont Heights Estates and assess residents' experiences with the new development. The University Partnership was also asked to assess the experience of former residents of College Hill and Ponce de Leon with their new living arrangements, including those who returned to the new Belmont Heights development and those who remained relocated elsewhere.



Figure 3. Streetscape and community park at Belmont Heights Estates

Impact Highlights

The Housing Authority of the City of Tampa and the HOPE VI Developer, Michaels Development Company (MDC), formed a public-private partnership that led the way in obtaining the financing necessary to construct the new HOPE VI community. THA provided \$20 million in competitively awarded federal HOPE VI funds, a vacant buildable site, relocated all public housing families, and demolished the old public housing community buildings. Michaels Development Company obtained public and private funding via a 4% bond from the Hillsborough County Housing Finance Authority, and a 9% low income housing tax credit allocation from the State of Florida Housing Finance Corporation. MDC also obtained \$1.2 million in private-sector funding from the Bank of America and the Federal Home Loan Bank. The City of Tampa provided \$1.95 million in Community Development Block Grant funds for the redevelopment effort.

The results of this study show that Belmont Heights Estates has had a strong, positive economic and social impact on its surrounding neighborhood and has contributed to the resurgence of the East Tampa community. The results indicate that residents have increased buying power (as shown by increased family incomes) and that property values in the neighborhood surrounding Belmont Heights have substantially appreciated. More specifically, highlights include:

- Median household incomes at Belmont Heights Estates are 78% higher than those at College Hill and Ponce de Leon.
- Median home sale prices in the neighborhood surrounding Belmont Height Estates rose by 123% from 1995 to 2003, while prices increased by 84% in the Tampa Bay Metropolitan Area during the same period.
- The number of occupational licenses issued in the Belmont Heights Estates area rose from 12 in 1996 to 199 in 2003, an increase of 1,558%.

In addition to its positive economic impact, the Belmont Heights Estates HOPE VI development also generated a number of other important achievements, including a significant reduction in crime and increased quality of life. Highlights from this part of the study include:

- Crime rates for Part 1 crimes (murder, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, auto theft, and larceny) as reported by the City of Tampa Police Department fell by 48% between 1999 and 2005 in the crime grids (97, 98, 108) that comprise Belmont Heights Estates (the sites of the former College Hill and Ponce de Leon) and the surrounding neighborhood. This compares with a decrease of 30% for the City of Tampa as a whole.
- A large majority (84%) of Belmont Heights Estates residents rated it as an excellent or good place to live.
- Children are not exposed to lead-based paint in the new development.
- Belmont Heights includes accessibility for persons with disabilities.
- Ninety percent (90%) of community leaders interviewed indicated that Belmont Heights had an extremely positive or somewhat positive economic impact on the area.
- A majority (77%) of community leaders interviewed felt that Belmont Heights had an extremely beneficial or somewhat beneficial impact on the economic and living conditions of those living in Belmont Heights Estates.

In a survey of the former residents of College Hill and Ponce de Leon, the majority indicated that their living conditions have improved. More specifically, one hundred percent (100%) of former College Hill and Ponce de Leon residents who returned to live at Belmont Heights Estates indicated that the condition of their home is better than it was before.

Challenges

Neighborhood revitalization is a complex process that depends upon the interplay of a number of factors over a period of time. The HOPE VI program was designed to provide a stimulus to neighborhood change by funding the demolition of distressed public housing and the subsequent development of new, mixed-income communities through public-private partnerships. Some facets of revitalization must rely on other sources of community support.

The survey of current Belmont Heights Estates residents indicates that there are some challenges in stimulating resident participation in employment assistance programs, adult education, computer literacy training, and other services. Resident willingness to participate in these programs may grow over time as they become more familiar with how these programs can benefit their quality of life.

Conclusion

Neighborhood quality is in a very large part determined by the quality and condition of its homes, regardless of whether these homes are houses or apartments or are rented or owned. By eliminating distressed public housing and replacing it with new, high-quality, mixed-income development at Belmont Heights Estates, the Housing Authority of the City of Tampa has made a significant contribution to the revitalization of East Tampa. The Belmont Heights Estates neighborhood is no longer in a downward spiral of poverty and rampant crime. Living and economic conditions for the neighborhood and beyond have improved and are still improving. Children are no longer exposed to lead-based paint poisoning, persons with disabilities no longer struggle with barriers to accessibility, criminals no longer lurk in the alleys, and neighborhood property values are no longer depreciating.

The Housing Authority of the City of Tampa and its partners in community building have shown a capacity for the hard work involved in revitalization of distressed public housing. Despite the challenges offered by the need to continue to extend the positive impact of the Belmont Heights Estates HOPE VI development, the prospects ahead look promising.



For Additional Information

If you have any questions or comments about the Shimberg Center for Affordable Housing or the Florida Housing Data Clearinghouse we'd like to hear from you. Please contact us by phone at 1-800-259-5705 or (352) 273-1192, or by email at fhdc-comments@shimberg.ufl.edu.

Other Internet web sites that you can use are:

- <http://www.flhousingdata.shimberg.ufl.edu/> for the Florida Housing Data Clearinghouse
- <http://www.shimberg.ufl.edu/> for general information about the Shimberg Center and its staff.

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