

A Rebirth for Blackwell, and New Homes for Many

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Reginald and Selicia Allen watched their future being fit neatly into place in South Richmond.

A construction crane wheeled the first floor of their new home onto a waiting foundation in the 300 block of East 16th Street recently. The second story soon followed.

It was a proud moment for the Allens, who are buying their first home, and also for Blackwell, a community transformed from public housing and blighted buildings into a neighborhood of new homes and apartments.

"It's come a long way," said Reginald Allen, 52, a forklift driver who is between jobs.

Allen and his wife, a 38-year-old archivist at Virginia Union University, are among the first buyers of a new section of owner-occupied housing being built in Blackwell by the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority. Their \$177,000 home could cost them considerably less with federal assistance on their down payment and an \$8,000 federal tax credit.

"These houses, if the buyer is qualified, can be half-price," said RRHA's CEO, Anthony Scott. "Now that's affordable."

The homes are part of the Goose Creek community being built under the federally funded HOPE VI project, a \$27 million grant awarded to the housing authority in 1997. The grant has paid for demolition of public housing and blighted buildings in Blackwell. In their place, the housing authority has developed new apartments and homes, including many for ownership instead of rent, in Blackwell, as well as in Fulton in the East End and Swansboro on South Side.

"It's making a big difference," said Ruby Lewis, 72, who moved from public housing to an apartment for seniors as part of the HOPE VI project.

Lewis was on hand last month as the housing authority launched a new phase of the Goose Creek project with the construction of four modular homes, three of them facing James H. Blackwell Elementary School on East 16th Street and one directly behind on East 17th Street. Scott pledged to shorten the 90-day assembly process to less than 40 so that the Allens and other buyers can occupy their homes by Christmas.

The modular homes are constructed by Nationwide Custom Homes, based in Martinsville, and assembled by Hearthside Homes, which plans to build 106 homes in the Goose Creek community for RRHA.

"I'm looking forward to working with 106 new homeowners," said Hearthside owner Larry Atkins.