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## HOWARD'S OLDEST PUBLIC HOUSING COMPLEX TO BE REBUILT AS MIXED-INCOME SITE

In the summer of 1969, every heavy thunderstorm brought a deluge of mud from a nearby creek that covered Fels Lane just off **Ellicott City's** Main Street, where many of the historic town's poorer African-American residents lived in dilapidated rented wooden homes with no indoor plumbing.

That same year, then-rural Howard County's governing commissioners replaced those old shacks with a brick public housing complex of townhouses and apartments on a hill above the historic mill town. They called it Hilltop Housing.

Now, county housing officials are ready to move to the next level, wiping out the last vestiges of that earlier era by replacing Hilltop Housing with a \$50 million mixed-income community with more than twice as many homes and apartments that they plan to be fully integrated, both economically and racially.

Instead of concentrating poor families in separate public housing, the new idea is to mix people of all incomes to avoid stigmas and to encourage those receiving subsidies to strive for more. In addition, Howard's new efforts are aimed at producing enough revenue to support maintenance and renovations when needed.

The trend is not new. Years ago, Baltimore demolished high-rise public housing towers that had become racially segregated vertical slums, replacing them with mixed-income communities.

"When you look at Columbia and the attitudes, the changes are substantial" in the past 41 years, said William A. Ross, chairman of the county's housing commission, which owns Hilltop and nearby Ellicott Terrace, a 60-unit apartment complex the county bought later. Ross, a retired federal housing official who is African-American, found Columbia attractive and moved his family from **Catonsville** to the progressive new planned town in 1968.



"It's a sequence of progressivism," Ross said of the planned new round of changes in Howard's public housing. At 81, he well remembers the old, segregated Fels Lane.

Developer Stavrou Associates Inc. of [Annapolis](#) has a final design concept that will replace the 94 units at Hilltop, which are to be demolished, and the 60 apartments at nearby Ellicott Terrace, which will be renovated. The new 265-unit community, called Ellicott Heights, is to be for both market-rate and subsidized low-income renters. It will sport a new, larger recreation center, walking paths, and some of the latest design finishes and environmentally friendly features.

"I think it's going to be night and day," Stavrou vice president Stephen J. Moore said about the visual impact of the new community. "We're going to replicate the historic nature of Ellicott City. You'll feel you're walking down Main Street," he said.

The new recreation center will be nearly four times the size of the current one, and the community will boast small parks, pathways and other community-friendly features that should help integrate it into the larger neighborhood, he said.

Howard officials are pursuing the same mixed-income concept at Guilford Gardens, a 100-unit, 30-year-old public housing complex built in 1980 on Oakland Mills Road in east Columbia. There, new, environmentally friendly mixed-income buildings are under construction.

Once complete, the two projects will also help the county in another way, said Thomas Carbo, deputy county housing director.

"I think it leaves us in really good shape," he said. "We can't talk to other property owners and developers about redeveloping their property if ours is an eyesore. We wanted to get our house cleaned."

Unlike the flat Guilford Gardens site, however, the Ellicott City complexes are on very hilly, difficult terrain. "It's definitely more of a challenge than Monarch Mills," Carbo said, using the new name for the Guilford Gardens complex.

Stavrou initially presented two concepts for Hilltop, one expanding the existing Roger Carter recreation center and the other replacing it. The latter has been chosen, and work could get under way by early 2012, officials said. The center is across the street from Hilltop, and is included in the restoration plan.

"It has to be carefully phased," said Carbo. "No one will be displaced," though officials are leaving units vacant as turnover occurs naturally. Rents for the new units are expected to range from \$376 to \$1,775 a month for two- to three-bedroom apartments, duplexes and townhouses with 700 to 1,300 square feet.

The Roger Carter Recreation Center began life in the early 1950s as a segregated elementary school, and was later used as a county police station. Now it boasts a swimming pool and other facilities for Hilltop residents. Instead, a new recreation center designed for the purpose is to rise at the north end of the site, including an indoor pool that can be used year-round.

"Recreation and Parks was very much in favor of moving it," said Carbo, who added that the existing center is "not well designed."

Bill Withers, 57, who has owned a private home near the center for the past four years, agreed that moving the center "makes a lot of sense," especially since traffic on narrow Fels Lane can be tricky.

"The whole project is probably going to be good for the county, and definitely for the neighborhood," he said. Hilltop's aging units, he added, are not in great shape.

Kim Johnson, 40, an eight-year resident of Hilltop, said she, too, is looking forward to the transformation, and is anxious to stay once it is complete.

"I think it's a good idea because the apartments are old," she said. Johnson, along with other residents, attended a presentation on the project in November. She is worried about higher rents, though, especially since she's just coming off unemployment to begin a new clerical job.

"I'm kind of excited. If I'm able to stay there, I would love it," she said.

Other county residents who serve on the policy-making Housing and Community Development Board and the separate Housing Commission also approve, they said.

Michael G. Riemer, a member of both bodies, said the Hilltop project is not an easy one, but it is necessary.

"It's a really tough site, with all the hills," he said. "It's an improvement that has to happen," he said,.

"I think it allows the county to keep affordable housing in the county long-term," said Shaun Eddy, chairman of the HCD board.