

This Town's Looking Better All the Time

But funding cuts threaten to slow progress as grants dry up and money for housing vouchers falters

By Brian Quinlan

WHAT A DIFFERENCE a decade makes. Ten years ago, John Clarke says, most people wouldn't even walk the litter-strewn section of George Street between New Street and Commercial Avenue. Four high-rises defined the skyline and Clarke, the director of the New Brunswick Housing and Redevelopment Authority, says the so-called lower George Street area was in bad shape.

Today, big changes are visible. The New Brunswick Housing and Redevelopment Authority spent millions to tear down the towers and put up new units and the neighborhood is coming back. But it appears that the grants that propelled the city's rebirth are drying up before the work is done.

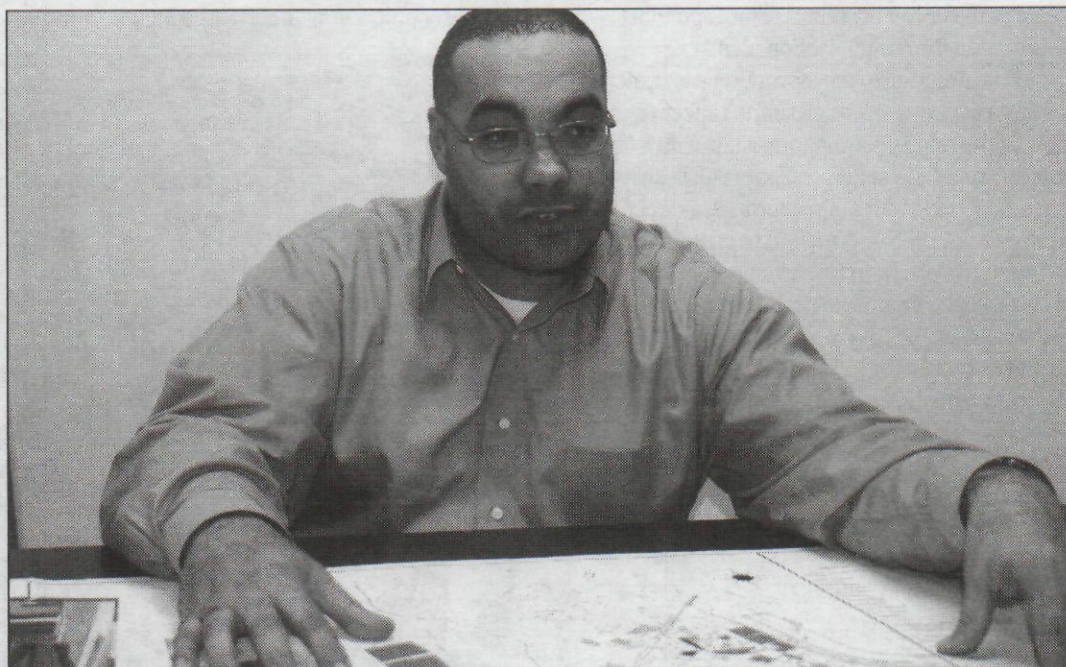
Some tenants initially opposed the razing of the towers that comprised the New Brunswick Homes. Despite the neighborhood's decline, many people were attached to their apartments and the relatively low rents. When the redevelopment authority got a \$7.5 million Hope VI federal grant and decided to level the buildings, relocate 183 families and build new housing, there was resistance. Hope VI grants are intended to revitalize the nation's most distressed public housing.

Clarke says one resident threatened to chain himself to a radiator and go down with his building; others attended protest meetings. But with the completion of a new college residence hall in the area and the final phase of the Hope VI redevelopment going into effect, Clarke says the new downtown is something the city—and the city's residents—can be proud of.

"If you said 10 years ago that there was going to be a college dormitory on [lower George Street] people would have thought you were crazy," Clarke says. Yet, this fall more than 650 college students will call Rockoff Hall, which sits on the corner of George and New streets, their home.

The New Brunswick Housing and Redevelopment Authority operates 320 public housing units throughout the city. The group has 34 full-time workers, an operating budget of about \$4 million and is New Brunswick's designated redevelopment authority.

Robert D'Anton, president of real-estate development company AST Development, based in Lavallette, says New Brunswick is a



Proud of the authority's work on lower George Street, Clarke hopes to avoid becoming a "bare-bones" housing provider.

better city to work and live in because of the authority's efforts. D'Anton has held jobs in the city dating back to 1980 and AST recently partnered with the housing authority to build 80 affordable rental units near Route 18 in New Brunswick.

"They get things done in New Brunswick," D'Anton says. "Of all the housing authorities we've worked with in the state, they're probably the best." AST is currently working with the city to build 102 housing units, 850 parking spaces and offices on the corner of French and Plum streets.

George Berry lived in building three of the New Brunswick Homes towers that were demolished. Initially, Berry says, he didn't want to leave his apartment. It took awhile, but Berry, now a commissioner on the board of the redevelopment authority, says a new community is being built in the footprints of the old apartments.

He says residents of the lower George Street area are developing a crime watch to stop drug dealing and slow down speeding drivers. He credits the housing authority and Clarke with bringing people together and putting up the money to revitalize the area.

One of the projects supervised by the housing authority is Hope Manor, which combines 68 affordable housing units with more than 9,000 sq. ft. of retail space. Another project, dubbed Riverside, is a development of 76 townhouses, half of them set aside as affordable housing and managed by the housing and redevelopment authority. On the horizon is the Lord Stirling Senior Housing, 48 age-restricted units to be built in a renovated school building on George

Street. The construction will begin in December 2005 and finish a year later, Clarke says.

Among the housing authority's other projects is Fulton Square, a development of 180 townhouses for rent and sale. The housing authority is also overseeing construction of the town's new 400,000-sq.-ft. high school.

The list is impressive, but there is uncertainty about the future. C. Roy Epps, president of the Civic League of Greater New Brunswick and a member of the advisory committee for the Hope VI grant, says funding for the city's efforts is slipping, making it difficult to provide housing vouchers to everyone who needs them.

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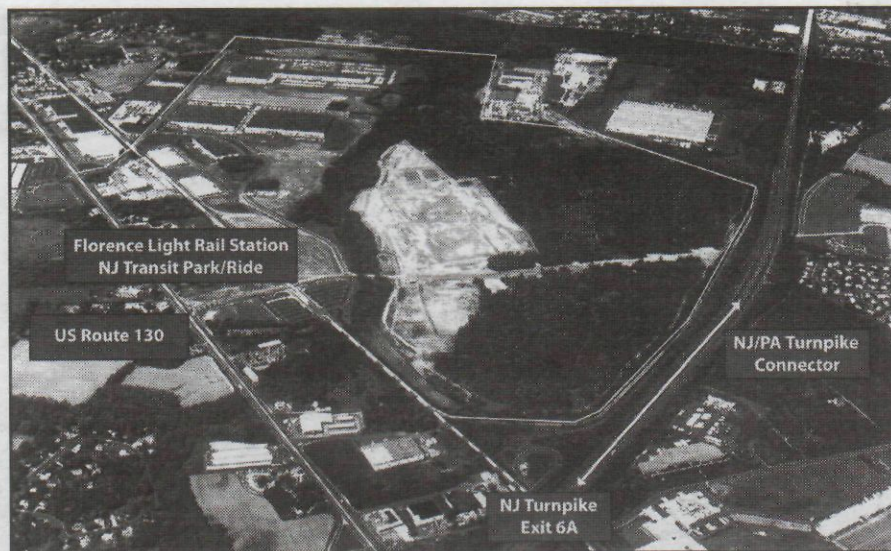
Clarke says the housing authority has done a good job of stretching its money, but questions what further funding cuts will do to the authority. Grants like Hope VI that pumped millions into New Brunswick are no longer available and Clarke says the authority has lost

30% to 40% of its funding in the last four years. It has reduced staff by 10% in the last year. If the cuts continue, Clarke says, the authority will become a "bare-bones housing provider."

"There is no reserve," Clarke says. "All of the rainy day money is gone." Still, Clarke says he remains optimistic about the housing authority's redevelopment work, despite the drop-off in funding that he says has afflicted all publicly sponsored housing projects since the September 11 terrorist attacks.

"I really hope our industry gets a lifeline," Clarke says, "because if it doesn't, regular people are going to get hurt." And a re-emerging city may find itself partly dressed up with no place to go. ♦

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