

CURB APPEAL CASE STUDY

ALBANY, GEORGIA

The Albany, Georgia Housing Authority (AHA) is in the process of converting its entire public housing inventory to RAD. To-date, AHA has converted 451 units and plans to convert the remaining 253 units in 2018.

AHA has a mix of building types, with varying levels of physical needs. O B Hines was one of the first projects to convert. O B Hines consists of 56 units and was renovated in 2012 using AHA Capital Funds, American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds and Operating Reserves. The property was built in 1942.

We talked with Dan McCarthy, Executive Director of AHA until March 2017 after decades of service with the agency.

Question: O B Hines was built in 1942. What special things did you do when you renovated the property in 2012 to make it look so warm and inviting?

For O B Hines, we spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to dress it up. It was not just the landscaping, but fencing, exterior painting, sidewalks and more.

- For beginners, we started with what was probably our biggest asset – the mature oak trees. We were able to save all but a few that had roots encroaching on the structures. And, to better preserve those that we saved, we installed curving (serpentine) sidewalks to reduce the impact on the



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- tree roots. These curving sidewalks are now a major feature of the project – they invite you to walk and enjoy the property.
- We put in a lot of pine straw in defined beds around tree roots and filled in with shrubs. We also put in metal borders to keep the pine straw looking well kept, and this allows landscaper to edge up. Keeping a defined bed keeps residents from walking in them.
- We used planted palms for shrubbery, something different than the typical shrubs used in Georgia.

- We installed an irrigation system. Though they are susceptible to resident tampering, the irrigation system was necessary to help the plants withstand the heat of the summer in the South. The cost of the system has been worth it.
- We installed a different kind of grass: a zoysia-hybrid designed for heavy traffic that is drought-tolerant. It was more expensive, but worthwhile.
- We painted the exterior red bricks with colors that were soothing and more up-to-date: gray and brown.
- We installed white porch railings and removed the existing metal pipe railings. We also installed white energy-efficient windows. They wrapped the exterior pipe columns with a white material to match railings and windows.
- We installed decorative fencing
- We created new parking areas near the landscaping
- We installed security cameras. The cost of these has been worthwhile for the benefits they offer.

Collectively, the above has helped create an attractive, pleasing atmosphere.

Question: When you renovated your properties in 2010 and 2012, you clearly made landscaping and curb appeal a high priority. Why was that?

We actually caught the curb appeal “bug” from the Charleston, South Carolina Housing Authority director, who encouraged us to look at our properties from a market approach, particularly to focus on curb appeal. We had wanted to do a Choice Neighborhood project in the same area and so we wanted to be consistent with the quality of design. We worked with an architect and landscape architect to make the design decisions. Our Board was very interested in the preservation of the oak trees. We learned



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some valuable lessons through the renovation at Thronateeska, another of the first properties to convert, and, as a result, our second project, OB Hines, was the recipient of that learning.

Question: How hard has it been to keep the landscaping up? What do you do?

It is a challenge to keep the irrigation system intact, but it’s worth it. We also decided to contract out the landscaping service to professionals. AHA pays for the landscaping vendor to provide services year-round, so the landscaping continues to look attractive, even in the winter months.

Question: It's apparent that there is a high level of resident upkeep and sense of community pride, which obviously must make the job of management/maintenance much easier. How do you do that?

It's a challenge at times. We've had problems, particularly with maintaining the decorative fencing, but we just keep at it!

The security cameras have been really helpful. Property management staff follow up with residents who have damaged the grounds to enforce the rules, based on the footage from the cameras. The cameras, therefore, help deter and reduce resident damage. The cameras also reduce crime, because residents



and neighbors know that AHA not only can document the person who damages the grounds, but also other crimes, and that AHA keeps residents accountable. The police have said that crime has been greatly reduced since the cameras were installed.

We were able to get the property management staff to buy into the agency's commitment to curb appeal and to truly enforce the rules with residents.

At Thronateeska, which was renovated in two phases, the residents who were in the second phase – and witnessed the improvements – bought into the

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agency's vision and wanted to take care of their property.

The construction contractor hired a resident for a temporary job to help keep the property clean during renovations. This person was able to help enforce the rules and encourage his neighbors to care about their property, which had a lasting effect following the renovations.

We try to have residents involved in promoting the vision.

Question: What are your plans for the remaining properties, i.e., those that have not been renovated? Will you have enough funds to pull off the same level of improvements?

For the properties where we anticipate using 4 percent Low-Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTCs), we believe we can pretty much get there. But those properties that will not be using LIHTCs as part of their RAD conversions, we simply do not have the same funds to pull off the effect as, say, O B Hines. Still, these properties are stable and in decent physical condition. Hence, our approach will be to convert those latter properties using AHA's own funds, and then save up money in the future to undertake significant landscaping as funds become available.