

CURB APPEAL CASE STUDY

LAVONIA, GEORGIA

The Lavonia, Georgia Housing Authority (LHA) is located approximately 90 miles northeast of Atlanta. LHA converted all 180 of its public housing units to RAD in 2014. The units are scattered across 10 sites, all within a 9-mile radius, across 3 cities including Lavonia, Carnesville, and Canon. The majority of the stock was built in the 1950s and 1960s and is quite characteristic of public housing constructed throughout the Southeast during that era. The LHA does not operate a voucher program, so they chose to convert to project-based rental assistance (PBRA).

We spoke with Rick Whitworth, LHA's executive director.

Question: You own some very old (former) public housing stock – yet, the properties look great. What have you done to make them look so warm and inviting?

It's just a lot of little things. In fact, sometimes the work we do may not be noticeable at first, but years later, they make a lasting impression. For example, we planted small, inexpensive crape myrtle trees in a nice bed of pine straw and evergreens. Years later, the crape myrtles are very healthy in the warm sun of the Southeast. They come in a variety of beautiful vibrant colors and bloom throughout the summer months. They are very hardy, require very little upkeep and add remarkable color and beauty throughout the properties.

Planting small evergreens in strategic places can help to prevent erosion as well as adding color to both summer



Parker Smith Homes, Carnesville



Vandiver Homes, Lavonia

and winter months. Keeping a good stand of grass is a challenge. Here in the south, we are blessed with plenty of warm weather, so the kids play outside a lot. At the end of each year, we take inventory of places where we need additional grass. We found that Bermuda grass works best, and we apply it where necessary to remove any bald spots. A little each year can easily stay on top of the problem.

During the winter, the roots take hold, and by next summer, we have a nice strong root system and the sod spreads and blends into the yard nicely. We also installed development signs in all

our properties. The signs are at the entrance of each development and are in a bed of green shrubbery and flowering plants.

Question: You obviously like “tinkering” – can you give an example of some of your favorite efforts to create a more livable community?

I always like to be hands-on during any renovation project, whether outside on the grounds or inside the units. We designed our own flower beds and used plant material that would stand up to the conditions they were being planted in. We like to use evergreens so they will look good and add color year-round.

We try to look at each project and place new plant material where children are unlikely to play. We had a problem with some residents hanging wet mops on the porch rail to dry, so most of our handrails were rusted and looked unattractive. After completing handrail replacements of about \$100,000, I decided to invent a stainless steel mop hanger that would allow the mop to hang down and drain on the ground instead of over a handrail or air conditioner cage.



Shuford Homes, Lavonia



Bill Clark Homes, Lavonia

We also replaced our old Luan doors with new solid wood doors. They look much nicer, but the heavier door can cause stress cracks at the face, near the top hinge. I designed and made a steel powder-coated cap that would hold the heavier door firm in place and prevent any stress on the top hinge location. The powder-coated finish looks good, and we solved the problem. We added some nice benches and smoking stands in outside areas where residents could enjoy each other’s company.

Small things can save your maintenance department a lot of time. I advise PHAs to never think of fixing something only for the immediate time being, but rather look at every problematic situation and try to find a long-term solution.



Bowers Homes, Canon

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?

I've always held the belief that our properties should look no different than the neighborhood I live in. If I wouldn't like something in my own neighborhood, why should I accept any less for our housing authority residents? If we think something would improve the appearance, and it is something that is achievable and within reason, then we try to do it.

For example, we had an issue with the school bus stopping only once in one of our properties. Children would walk to that stop and wait for the bus, sometimes standing in the rain. We decided to install a nice school bus shelter. The kids use it and it looks attractive from the road. It was not inexpensive, but it will be there for many decades. Our staff tries to be a good example to our residents, and we share the same values and sense of neighborhood pride.

Question: How are you able to sustain these standards?

Educating our tenants is a big part of what our staff does. We can either fix the problem and walk away, just to fix it again another day, or we can fix it and explain to the resident why and how to prevent it from needing to be fixed again.

Showing a resident how to clean a stove is normal for us. We try to treat every work order as an



Star Whitlow Office Building, Administrative Offices

opportunity to train the residents on potential ways to prevent the part from breaking again. We try to educate, explaining why throwing a cigarette butt on the ground damages the integrity of the entire neighborhood. I'll admit – it is a never-ending challenge, but one that does produce results, if you are consistent.

We try to make decisions that have long-term effects. We recently realized we needed to install back-flow and pressure reducer valves in several developments to prevent water loss due to pressure spikes, which would eventually cause damage to water lines, faucets, gaskets and other plumbing fixtures. This was an expense that is underground, covered up with

dirt and seen by almost no one other than the people installing it. Some expenses yield a positive visual appeal, while others do not. In this case, we will reduce our water consumption and damage to plumbing fixtures over the years.

Similarly, we made the conversion from free-standing water heaters to tankless ones. These are not seen by many people, but save money on the tenants' gas bill and virtually eliminate the expensive after-hours calls to replace a ruptured hot water heater. By making cost-saving decisions like these, we feel it will free up more financial resources for the more visual efforts.

Question: You also have one site that was fortunate to receive American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) stimulus funds to undertake comprehensive renovations. There, you also upgraded the landscaping. Can you share what design elements you introduced as part of those landscape plans?

This project was one that I'm most proud of. This development was built in 1950. After years of



Mail Center

underfunding in the Public Housing Capital Fund program, our Board decided that we would submit a demolition and disposition application to remove it from our inventory. Affordable housing in this area is needed, and we did not want to tear it down – but we also did not have the resources to do a complete renovation, which it badly needed. At around this same time, we received word of the ARRA bill. We quickly reassessed our position and began looking at ways we may could keep the development.

Along with a complete interior redesign and remodel, we redesigned the parking, landscape, sidewalks and pretty

much every inch of ground area was changed and made more attractive and useful. I think this may be one of our best curb appeal projects to date.

We purchased some land from the neighboring farmer, which allowed us to relocate the parking from the street side to the rear of the units. This opened the way for the city to pour a new sidewalk along the roadway for pedestrian use. We removed all the old sidewalks, which ran in the middle of the yards, and replaced them with individual sidewalks to each apartment. This freed up the middle of the yards for better drainage and play areas. We removed the old clothes lines and replaced them with removable umbrella style clothes lines. If the resident does not wish to have one, we simply don't install it. If they do wish to have one, the hole and bracket is mounted in the ground and easily installed. We utilize the space between the sidewalk and the building (front and rear) to create attractive shrubbery and flower beds covered with pine straw.



Mail Center

In this development, as well as all our developments, we have new mail centers that are wheelchair-accessible. We designed our own mail shelters using brick or rock columns that are trimmed in vinyl using a shingle or metal roof and are lit with solar power for night use.

At the entrance, we installed a new development sign with several large shrubbery and flower beds and a curved and hand-railed sidewalk leading to the mail center making for a very pretty walk. The property originally bordered a field with horses so we planted crape myrtles along the fence as a buffer and to add color along the parking bays. To



Bill Clark Homes, Lavonia



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top off the rock fence line and make it even more appealing to people who pass by, we lined the fence and the yards with red maple trees. They have now reached about 30 feet tall and turn a bright red/orange during fall. They provide a nice shade along the fence line, which tenants enjoy.