



The Progress-Index

07/20/2007

LISC project to be chosen this fall

BY F.M. WIGGINS
STAFF WRITER

PETERSBURG — In five years Virginia Local Initiatives Support Corp. Program Director Ford Weber envisions neighborhoods well on their way to the ultimate vision of urban villages.

But five years is only the halfway point for Virginia LISC's ultimate plan for four of the city's most under-served neighborhoods: Battersea; Rome Street; Westview and Birdville; Halifax and Blandford.

Weber said the four targeted neighborhoods are areas that are sometimes overlooked or passed by traditional developers.

"I think if you go five years out, we'll see at least 60 single family homes constructed in these areas and very likely several multi-family developments, and mixed-use development," Weber said.

But key to all that development, Weber said, is finding a first project to complete.

"It has to be something catalytic, something that will sustain the momentum and draw the private money in," Weber said.

Weber said Virginia LISC has already begun acquiring property within the four targeted neighborhoods.

Virginia LISC acts as a bridge between interested residents, corporations, foundations, government and developers interested in increasing the supply of high quality, affordable housing in a given area. Virginia LISC then leverages available dollars into single family, multi-family, community and commercial developments with far greater reach and impact than would be possible through individual effort.

While it hasn't been determined yet exactly what the first project in Petersburg will be, Weber said that he is expecting an announcement will be made by the fall. "I'm still not sure exactly what that announcement may be yet because we're not actually the developer," Weber said. "We just facilitate the development."

City Manager B. David Canada said that the city is still working with LISC and is doing its own work to determine what might be an appropriate project in each of the targeted areas.

"We're looking at the economic feasibility and LISC is continuing to explore with its development partners," Canada said. "There's been a lot of internal movement at this point, the financial feasibility still hasn't been determined at this point."

Weber said one of the lessons learned from LISC's next closest development project on Cary Street in Richmond was to not announce too much in advance and to acquire as much property in advance of starting a project.

"In some ways it's like putting together a puzzle," Weber said. "In two to three years we'd like to have most of the land and after that, we can really begin on the housing initiatives."

Weber said the city and the city's housing authority, as well as Petersburg Urban Ministries and the Phoenix Project, have been working for several years to acquire pieces of property suitable for development.

"Petersburg is definitely a hidden gem," Weber said, adding that frequently companies and businesses coming into the city seem to overlook the under-served majority of the population. "We see opportunities — to help — where a lot of others see problems."

• F.M. Wiggins may be reached at 732-3456, ext. 254 or fwiggins@progress-index.com.

©The Progress-Index 2007