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Alexandria's Berg Is in Hot Water

Housing Project's Fate Uncertain

By Michel Marriott
Washington Post Staff Writer

A rainy day's light strained through the neat starched folds of Edna Edwards' sheer green curtains, pushing back the darkness in the 47-year-old woman's small apartment in Alexandria's George Parker housing project.

Near the window, her 15-year-old son slouched in a large stuffed chair, his attention drawn to a vintage Lone Ranger rerun flickering on a portable black and white television. He said there was nothing else to do.

By the window, studying its view, sat Mrs. Edwards.

Throughout the afternoon, as is her habit, her dark, broad-featured face was trained on the happenings along the northern edge of her newly controversial neighborhood, "The Berg."

"I can't see why they want to put us out of here," Edwards said, in a vague reference to residents of the walled townhouses that have sprung up in the last 10 years around the barracks-like, two-story rowhouses in which she and her neighbors live. "This is our home."

More than a century ago, when Alexandria's waterfront industries required strong backs, Negro shanties were built to keep a ready labor force nearby, historians say. For reasons lost to history, the area became known as The Berg.

Today, the term describes four square blocks of aging public housing—the George Parker and Samuel Madden projects—for almost 450 poor blacks in the heart of chic Old Town.

Some say the choice location, bounded by North Pitt, Princess, Pendleton and Fairfax streets, is too valuable for low-income housing, while others argue that

See BERG, C3, Col. 1



The Berg, public housing area in Alexandria's Old Town, where clotheslines are heavy on the coldest days, and where children outnumber the adults.

Housing Project In Alexandria Caught Between Opposing Forces

BERG, From C1

the traditional community for generations of Alexandria's blacks should stay. To raze the buildings and uproot their residents would call into question the fundamental character of the city, says Mayor Charles E. Beatley.

In recent months, business and civic leaders have been recommending that the housing authority sell The Berg to cash in on its lucrative real estate potential.

Spokesmen for the city's Chamber of Commerce say that if The Berg was sold a block at a time for luxury apartment development, each of the four blocks should bring about \$2.5 million to the housing authority. It could then invest the profits, they say, and distribute the earnings to displaced Berg residents in the form of rent subsidies in the private rental market.

Others say that selling The Berg would give its residents a way out of a racially segregated ghetto, help relieve the area's crime rate, and save the financially strapped housing authority from bankruptcy.

Angus T. Olson, the housing authority's executive director, opposes the sale. He says no federally recognized system to distribute such rent subsidies exists. Moreover, a city council resolution prevents the city from reducing its current level of public housing units.

And why destroy a community that apparently works? asks H. Winfield McConchie, chairman of the housing authority's commissioners.

"We think that The Berg is a nice residential community," he said. "And I think if [the tenants] had their druthers, they'd rather stay there."

Olson is preparing to use a federally funded program to renovate The

Berg's George Parker section this summer. The plan, he said, would upgrade more than a fourth of The Berg, giving an "Old Town ambience" to the 41-year-old red brick buildings.

That worries The Berg's detractors, who say that such a program would lock the renovated buildings into a federal contract that would prevent any sales until 1999.

In The Berg itself, people are frightened, confused and angry. Many asked that their names not be used for fear of reprisals by housing authority and welfare officials if they said the "wrong thing."

"None of this trouble started until these white people put up those big fine townhouses they built around us," Edwards said. "Years ago they didn't want to live around us; they were moving to the suburbs. Now they want our homes."

Edwards said she has lived in Alexandria's public housing for as long as she can remember. She came to The Berg in 1955 from Cameron Valley, a racially mixed housing project on the city's west side, and has lived in her cramped four-bedroom apartment for the last four years.

A velvet landscape painting dominates a pale green wall. A modest coffee table, couch and chair are the main furnishings downstairs. Her gas furnace and water heater stand exposed between her equally tiny kitchen and living room, and she likes it that way. "It makes it easier to dry my clothes."

She said The Berg is a good place to raise her five sons and two daughters on her husband's meager wages as a janitor at a private school in Arlington. Rent is based on a small percentage of a family's income.

Throughout The Berg, from its clean-swept stoops to its torn screen doors and rotting drain spouts, the vital signs of community abound. Its grounds are dotted with tiny wooden fences, demarcations for vegetable

and flower gardens. Clotheslines criss-cross back yards like low-strung utility lines, heavy with wash even on cold winter days.

The early morning brings forth the elderly who hobble along the uneven walks, whispering "good mornin'" as they pass familiar faces. Women in housecoats greet mail carriers and gossip on their front steps with neighbors. And seemingly all over, ceramic figures share windowsills with potted plants.

The sound of children at play in The Berg is nearly as constant as the roar of jets thundering overhead, winging their way to and from National Airport. Of the 438 people who live in The Berg, 228 are children, according to housing authority statistics.

For many, The Berg represents a place to recover from or languish in their mistakes.

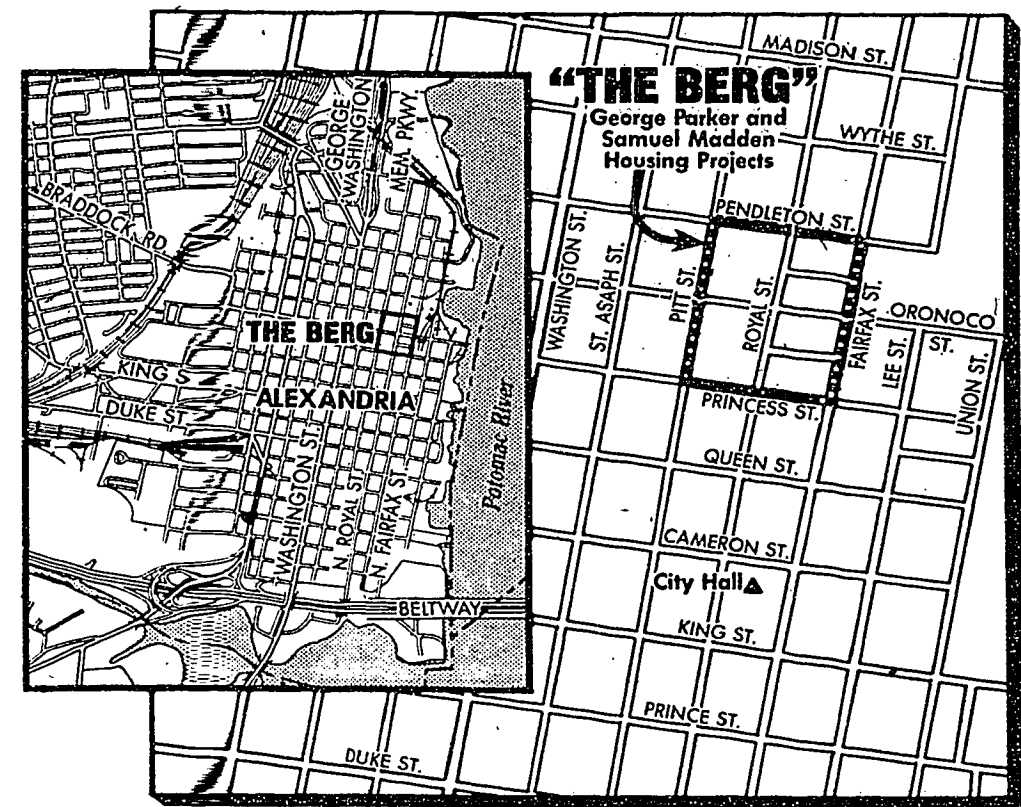
A 21-year-old single mother of two young children is illegally staying with a family in The Berg until she can save enough money to get her own apartment. "This is a real help for me," she said, bouncing her infant son in her lap.

When she moved into The Berg over a year ago, she said, she was surprised how peaceful it is. Life in The Berg, according to dozens of its residents, isn't the crime-ridden existence of desperate poverty many "outsiders" believe.

The Alexandria Police Department, located across the street from The Berg on the 400 block of N. Pitt Street, reports that there are no special problems with crime in The Berg's area. "It's about normal in the city," said police spokeswoman Kathy Salvas.

However, the housing authority has started a program to evict families who permit habitual criminals to stay in their apartments.

And last month, city council approved a plan to improve The Berg area's street lighting. Councilmem-



By Richard Furno—The Washington Post

ber Patsy Tecker suggested a joint crime watch program for Berg residents and people living in nearby luxury townhouses.

After a recent robbery in which an area homeowner was threatened by a youth with a sawed-off shotgun, patrolmen regularly walk a Berg beat.

Residents say they are troubled by what they consider The Berg's undeserved reputation for violent crime, and welcome the policemen. But they are more concerned about the projects' most glaring shortcomings—roach-infested apartments, widespread teen-age vandalism, and people who refuse to take care of their places.

Nonetheless, said Jerry Glymph, "there's no place like home. No matter if you go 1,000 miles, this will always be home."

"It's just like down in the country . . . Everybody knows everybody," said the 24-year-old office supply delivery man who has lived in The Berg for the last 15 years. "It would be a terrible loss if there was no Berg."

A few feet away, Glymph's seven-year-old nephew, Richard Lewis Glymph, was busy with a half dozen of his friends trying to recreate Joe

Theismann-Charlie Brown Super Bowl XVII action with a foam rubber football on a playing field muddied with raw sewage oozing up through the ground because of poor plumbing.

Those same narrow strips of balding earth used to be the playing fields for Ron Radfear. Now 19, he's unemployed, with dreams of becoming a professional athlete. He tells a bunch of his buddies, who've heard it all before, "I want to be a football star."

Radfear, who is medium height and weighs about 210 pounds, is an unskilled dropout from T.C. Williams High School. He lives with his mother in The Berg, and spends much of his time standing by one of its several outdoor basketball courts, playing an occasional game, but mostly talking.

"I used to do a little crime," he said, intentionally unpecific. "You got to make money some kind of way." For emphasis, he talked about tough The Berg once was.

But no more. "People here are just like people any where else," he said, adjusting his cap over his boyish face. "No different, just trying to survive."