

# John Roberts Homes: Holding Onto the Old

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**A**lexandria public housing residents and community activists broke bread together last week and vowed to fight the sale of any public housing in the city.

"Although we may be poor, we have everything to contribute to this city but the dollar bill," city-wide tenant council president Dorothy Turner said, addressing the newly formed Alexandria Housing Coalition. "But we love John Roberts and we want to stay. We will not be uprooted from our families, our homes and our church.

"We say, 'People over profits.'"

Turner's remarks at a prayer breakfast and a press conference afterward were prompted by a recommendation from City Manager Douglas Harman, who recently told the city Housing Authority that the authority should seriously consider selling the 90-unit John Roberts Homes, without providing replacement housing for the more than 200 families who now live in the complex.

Earlier, Harman had supported a City Council position that no public housing units would be sold without finding alternate housing for residents. However, during a grim budget session with the Housing Authority last month, Harman reversed his position and recommended that the sale of John Roberts be considered. In his recommendation, Harman noted that the John Roberts site, near the future Braddock Road subway station, is valued in excess of \$5.8 million, and that proceeds from the sale could be used to maintain other public housing in the city. Replacement housing, he said, would be contingent upon obtaining federal funds, which the Reagan administration very well could refuse to release.

"It is inevitable that in the next five to seven years the land will have to be sold," Harman said in an interview last week. "It has an extraordinary value. The question is not whether to sell, but 'how do you take advantage of its value and put it back into housing?'"

"I've been trying to awake people to the fact that public housing is only viable as long as the

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# Tenants Fight for Low-Income Housing

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federal government continues to subsidize it. The reality of the matter, however, is that as federal money continues to decrease, housing authorities everywhere are going bankrupt. Alexandria will not be an exception."

Local housing authorities expect to be told this week if the federal mortgages on the 40-year-old units are fully paid. If they are, the housing authority becomes sole owner and can dispose of the property as it wishes. The George Parker homes in Old Town also would be included in the mortgage decision.

Tenants, angered and concerned over Harman's recommendations, quickly de-

ecided to form a coalition to fight his proposals and last week's prayer breakfast was scheduled to announce their plans.

"It's the only home I know," said Doris Boggan during the coalition's first meeting. Boggan, who lives with her two grandchildren at John Roberts, rocked one grandchild on her knee and looked toward the orange brick units. "My 11-year-old granddaughter said, 'Mama, if we have to move where will we go?' I pray we can stay here."

In response to pleas from tenants like Boggan and in reaction to the bleak rental market facing tenants — more than 2,000 rental units last year were converted to condominiums or cooperatives — the 36-member housing coalition

called on the city to postpone any sale until more facts about the housing authority's budget were provided. The coalition, which includes groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union of Virginia and the Northern Virginia Urban League, also asked the city to prepare a study of the effects the sale would have on John Roberts' residents.

"What the (Housing Authority) board of commissioners and City Council need to understand is that low-income persons will no longer tolerate the insensitivity to their interests," said George Lambert, director of the Northern Virginia Urban League. "Seemingly, a pattern has developed whereby low-income residents are disproportionately displaced not only in our community but in other communities throughout the country . . . Although we recognize the importance of increased city revenue and the potential job opportunities that development provides for minorities . . . we strongly urge the (Housing Authority) board of commissioners to develop options that will not negatively impact on the tenants of public housing properties."

Harman's suggestion was one of three options offered to the Housing Authority at its budget session last month. The other two included lobbying federal housing officials to reverse a recent practice of decreased federal subsidies or asking the city to pick up the tab for increased operating deficits. Harman was quick to point out, however, that these two options were less than tenable. There is no indication, he said, that the federal government is willing to increase public housing subsidies, and the city, he added, will continue to face cutbacks in its budget as citizens demand cuts in property tax rates.