

Escalating value upsets some in Reedtown

The new homes built there were supposed to be more affordable, one woman says.

BY PAM STARR
STAFF WRITER

Back in 1905 a man named Joe Reed bought 30 acres of wooded land off of what is now Independence Boulevard, envisioning a place where blacks could own their own land and live safely.

He sold one- and two-acre lots to several blacks, most of whom were related. They built their houses and lived off the land, raising chickens, hogs, ducks and geese. Their children married, had kids and stayed. The next batch of kids did the same.

For decades life in Reedtown was simple. Although residential and commercial real estate surrounding the enclave developed at an alarming rate, the neighborhood still retained a flavor of its own. Margaret Baxter, 66, remembered those days with a wistful smile. Residents had to make do with outhouses, well water and dirt roads but Baxter said there were few complaints.

"It was nice and quiet, a good place to raise children," said Baxter, a lifelong resident who still lives in her grandparents' house on Mason Street. "I liked it better when I was a little girl."

Like it or not, progress came to Reedtown 20 years ago. The city, using federal block grant money, decided to provide basic services to 12 "target" neighborhoods, like Reedtown, that had been left behind by Virginia Beach's development boom. The city has spent more than \$50 million in federal and local funds since then to extend public water and sewer lines, pave dirt roads and rehabilitate housing in the neighborhoods.

Only about 32 people resided in Reedtown back then and a few sold their land after the city made the improvements.

Reed Associates bought several acres of land in 1983 and developed it into twenty 10,000-square-foot lots. Ram Gowda, managing partner, recalled that the firm originally wanted to subdivide into 7,500-square-foot lots, but the city required the lots to be bigger because of drainage problems.

"When we bought this land it was a junkyard filled with tires," said Gowda. "We hauled out two truckloads of tires — it was really unsanitary. We spent at least \$10,000 cleaning it up."

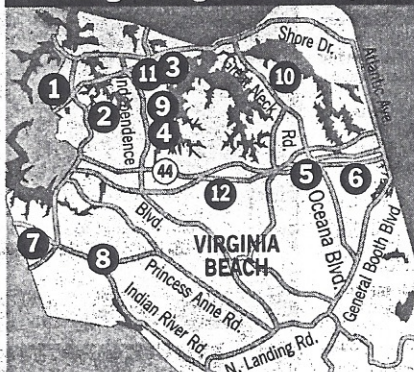
Gowda said they purchased the land because of its prime location adjacent to the bustling boulevard and Sentara Bayside Hospital. And, it was a "good buy." Reedtown is situated between McDonald Garden Center and the Thoroughgood Colony townhouse development. The wealthy subdivision of Wishart Cove is separated from Reedtown



Staff photo by STEVE EARLEY

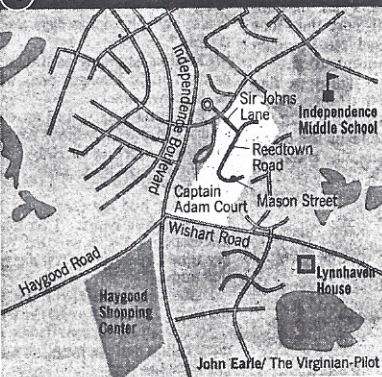
Margaret Baxter, 66, a lifelong resident of Reedtown, remembers the days of outhouses, well water and dirt roads with a wistful smile. The neighborhood, where she still lives in her grandparents' house on Mason Street, had a flavor of its own. "I liked it better when I was a little girl," she said.

The target neighborhoods



- 1 Burton Station
- 2 Newsome Farm
- 3 Lake Smith
- 4 Reedtown
- 5 Atlantic Park
- 6 Seatack
- 7 Queen City
- 8 Newlight
- 9 Gracetown
- 10 Mill Dam
- 11 Beechwood
- 12 Doyletown

4 Reedtown



About Reedtown

- Houses at start: 13
- Occupied houses deemed uninhabitable: 8
- Population at start: 42
- Percentage of land undeveloped: 72%
- Work completed: Water, sewer, streets, drainage, housing work complete.
- Public money invested: \$450,000, not including the cost of water and sewer work which was paid for from the city's utility fund.



This is the last of 10 profiles on the city's Target Neighborhoods.

by a privacy fence that extends along the rear boundary.

The firm sold the lots for \$18,000 to \$22,000 and builder Paul Angel-

son erected ranch and two-story houses that sold in the \$90,000 to \$110,000 range. That's what made Sherry Edwards upset. The houses

were supposed to be more affordable, like around \$75,000, so that former residents could move back, she said.

"We didn't know there would be two-story homes," said Edwards, 40, who has lived in Reedtown all of her life. "That raised taxes and assessments . . . they could inform us before anything happens. It's a lack of respect."

What really rankles her — and Margaret Baxter, however, is the privacy fence that McDonald Garden Center erected last year. The fence cuts off access to Reedtown Road from Independence Boulevard. It had been a handy shortcut for residents. Now they have to drive down Reedtown Road and through Thoroughgood Colony to reach the main thoroughfare. Baxter said that the road is supposed to stay open.

"They didn't give us notice, just put the fence up," said Baxter, who worked as a domestic most of her life. "If the ambulance comes in here, it can barely move around. We want to get that road open."

That's unlikely to happen. McDonald Garden Center bought two extra pieces of property in Reedtown and had them rezoned two years ago for commercial use. But the rezoning came with a condition: that the business install a fence and screening plants to give residents privacy, according to operations manager Tom Van Dyke.

"This was really done for their benefit," said Van Dyke. "It's standard operating procedure (to erect

Please see REEDTOWN, Page 22

SPECIAL REPORT: TARGET NEIGHBORHOODS

REEDTOWN

continued from Page 20

a fence) when a business abuts a residential property. But the road is still drivable if they choose to drive on it. The fence is three feet inside the property line."

Some residents see the fence as just another slap in the face to some of the blacks in Reedtown. The neighborhood now has more white and Filipino residents who live in new two-story homes, and blacks are in the minority. The new residents won't come to their civic league meetings, said Edwards, and are unfriendly. The integrity of the neighborhood has been lost forever in her eyes and she feels like an outsider.

This year Reed Associates will be developing eight more lots on Mason Street, where most of the long-timers live. Those homes will sell in the \$125,000 to \$135,000 range. Edwards is very angry about that.

"I would like to see a park for kids made out of one of those lots," said Edwards, bouncing her 18-month-old niece Daisha on her knee.

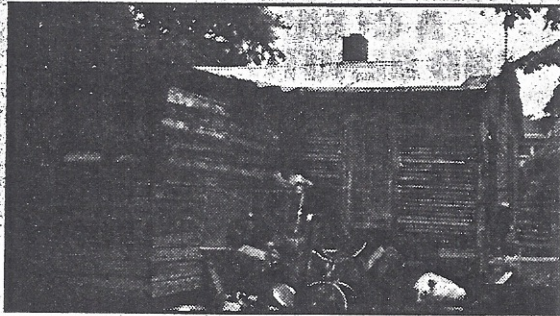
Improving low-income neighborhoods has always been paradoxical. While residents enjoy the city water and sewer lines, paved roads and streetlights, it does open the door to fresh development. City Housing Director Andy Friedman said that he has heard the same story in every target neighborhood.

"You can't improve a neighborhood and then say it's just for them," he said. "Their land value



Staff photo by STEVE EARLEY

Some residents were upset that newer, two-story homes in Reedtown were priced — at \$90,000 to \$110,000 — out of their range.



Reedtown's land was "a junkyard filled with tires," said developer Ram Gowda. "We spent at least \$10,000 cleaning it up."

Photo courtesy of City of Virginia Beach

has gone up based on these improvements. As far as the housing affordability problem — there's no way to tell me that's a negative."

One of the newer residents is Renee Shields, who moved into a ranch house on Reedtown Road with husband Kenneth in 1992. She

said that they bought in Reedtown because they knew the property was available and they liked the location.

"We didn't know it was a target neighborhood when we bought," said Shields, 27, who is white. "But it wouldn't have made a difference. It's a good neighborhood and we seem to get along with everyone. It's a nice place to live.

"I know there is some disappointment among them (the black residents), but it's something that happened," she added. "We didn't know about the history."