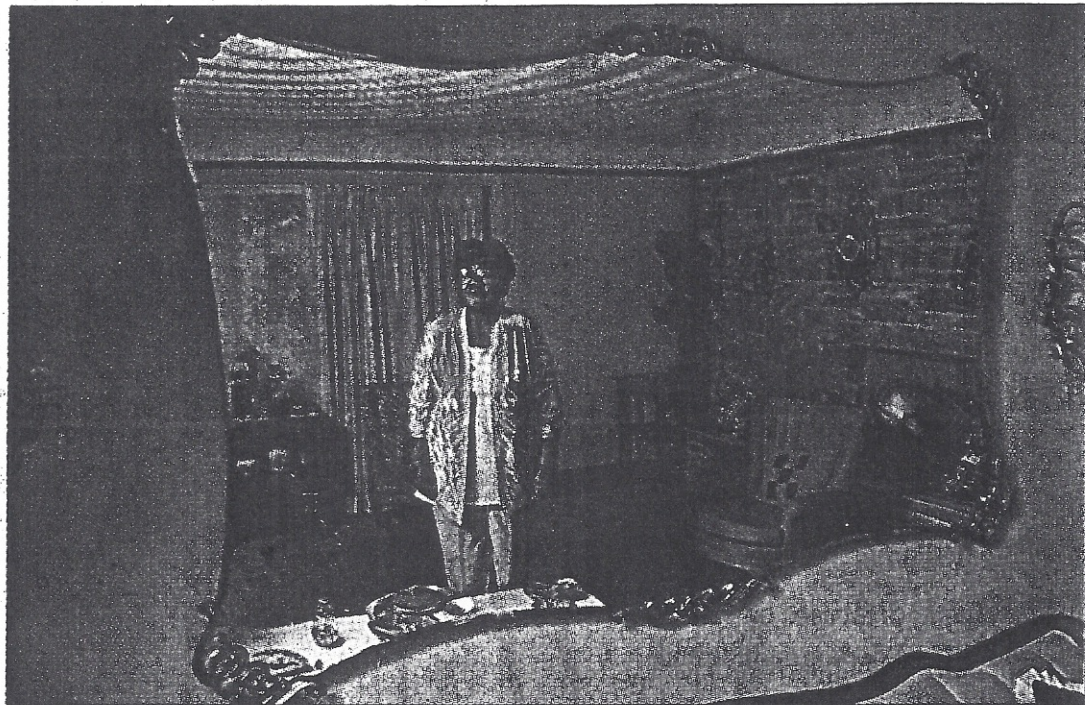


ON-TARGET NEIGHBORHOOD AID

“When the city renovated, it developed such pride in our neighborhood. Things that we had just overlooked before, we seemed to become more aware, of our yards, of our roads.”

— SADYE SHAW, RIGHT, RETIRED EDUCATOR AND CIVIC LEAGUE PRESIDENT



D. KEVIN ELLIOTT/The Virginian-Pilot

BY KAREN WEINTRAUB
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This is another in a series of occasional stories on issues affecting the future of Virginia Beach neighborhoods. The City Council is focusing on neighborhood issues as one of its top 10 priorities of the year.

To our Virginia Beach readers:



For a closer look at Seatack, one of 12 neighborhoods identified 20 years ago as pockets of

poverty in need of help. Please see today's Beacon.

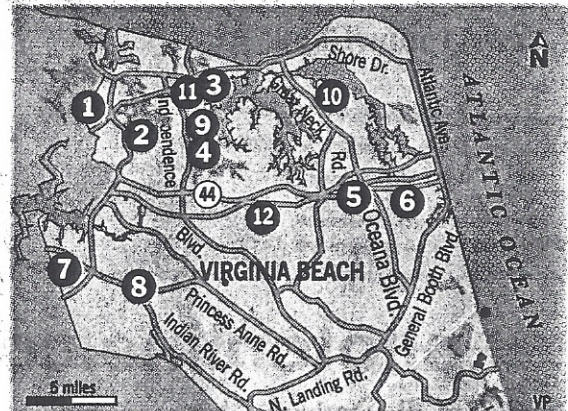
VIRGINIA BEACH — Newsome Farm looks like a typical suburban neighborhood, and Sadye Shaw loves it that way.

Kids pedal their bikes past well-kept houses and wide yards. Residents share vegetable gardens and work together to keep out unwanted development. One man, who moved out a few years ago, still lends his former neighbors a bus for their annual Christmas light tour.

“I wouldn’t live anyplace else, to tell you the truth,” said Shaw, a retired educator and civic league president.

But Newsome Farm wasn’t always so pleasant. Twenty years ago, like other mostly black neighborhoods in Virginia Beach, Newsome Farm had unpaved, unlit roads and collapsing houses. There was no city sewer or water. Mosquitoes hatched in swarms from the open gutters. And residents lived with dirt floors, leaky roofs and crumbling walls.

Please see Target, Page B3



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

Target: After some delays, neighborhoods improving

Continued from Page B1

So far Virginia Beach has spent more than \$40 million in federal funds and about \$10 million in local matching funds on the neighborhoods.

Under pressure from African-American civic leaders, the city decided in 1975 to provide basic services to 12 "target" neighborhoods: Atlantic Park, Beechwood, Burton Station, Doyletown, Gracetown, Lake Smith, Mill Dam, Newlight, Newsome Farm, Queen City, Reedtown, and Seatack.

These were areas — some as small as 15 homes — that weren't keeping pace with the new, mostly white subdivisions cropping up around them. Unable or unwilling to fund the construction itself, the city relied on federal block grant money for most of the project.

So far Virginia Beach has spent more than \$40 million in federal funds and about \$10 million in local matching funds on the neighborhoods. The money has gone to a variety of projects, including installing city water and sewer lines, improving streets and drainage systems, and building and rehabilitating houses.

Residents in the improved neighborhoods can now build homes for their children on lots that were once undevelopable. When they want to move, people are interested in buying their property. And areas that once were all poor and all black are now increasing in value and diversity.

The city has completed work in nine of the "target" neighborhoods, and the rest of what is planned in Queen City and Atlantic Park will be finished next year. Burton Station, which abuts Norfolk International Airport, will not be improved. Money there has been used to relocate residents, so the neighborhood — located in the airport's crash zone — can be turned into an industrial park.

Shaw, a member of the resident committee that has helped guide the program, is one of its most enthusiastic supporters.

"When the city renovated, it developed such pride in our neighbor-

Norfolk program for emotionally disturbed children until her retirement. "Things that we had just overlooked before, we seemed to become more aware, of our yards, of our roads."

Inspired by the nearby construction, even those who didn't qualify for housing rehabilitation assistance began fixing up their homes, she said. "Instead of having all those dilapidated houses in there, things seemed to improve."

The Target Neighborhood project is the City Council's most visible effort to preserve and revitalize communities. Its aim was to provide long-time taxpayers with the basic services that virtually every other Virginia Beach resident enjoys, and to spur development that would add to the local tax base.

In Newsome Farm, and most of the other neighborhoods where work is complete, those goals have been met.

Public money funded the first seven homes built in Newsome Farm after city water and sewer lines were extended and roads repaved. But now the private sector has taken over, and an entirely new subdivision is under construction on the north side of the neighborhood, which borders Newtown Road.

For the residents, the work has been a godsend, allowing them to tear down outdoor privies, drive safely down well-paved streets, and, in a number of the neighborhoods, walk along sidewalks for the first time.

Many residents, however, feel they have paid too high a price for the improvements.

The renovation opened their neighborhoods up to newcomers, taking away some of the sense of community the residents had when they didn't have much else.

While the work raised homeown-

up real-estate tax bills.

And despite Virginia Beach's good intentions, the work has not erased many long-time residents' skepticism of a city that took so long to offer its hand.

Once it was approved in 1975, the target neighborhood project proceeded at a snail's pace: It took nearly 21 years to complete work in nine of the neighborhoods.

The city chose to rely largely on federal funds, so the annual budget, and therefore the work that could be done, was limited to how much money flowed from Washington.

Neighborhood homeowners, who have paid city taxes for decades resent the fact that Virginia Beach spent \$1 of local money for every \$4 of federal funds.

"The city said they were running out of federal HUD money," Donald Wright, president of the Gracetown Civic League, said recently. "But why did they have to wait on HUD? Why couldn't they use city money? Anytime they want to do something in a black neighborhood, it has to be HUD money."

"We're not a welfare neighborhood," he said of his 65-home community off Independence Boulevard in the Thoroughgood area. "We're a working class neighborhood. We pay taxes like everybody else in the city, but we had to wait for HUD."

Other early decisions also affected the residents' view of the program.

In 1978, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development stepped in to stop the city government from charging residents for the work federal dollars had already funded.

A year later, the agency came within 30 days of cutting off Virginia Beach's community development funds because of the city's refusal to renovate dilapidated housing. Only when threatened did the city

prove administrative oversight of the project.

In most of the neighborhoods, however, the city's commitment has helped restore the trust of residents to whom renewal meant relocation and who felt rejected by a local government seemingly obsessed with growth.

Newlight resident William Stancil said he views the work as payback for all his years of handing over money to the government.

"You saw your tax money working for you to the point where others want to come in and build and be with you," he said.

And build they have.

Newlight, which straddles Indian River Road next to Regent University, had 75 dwellings — 12 that were deemed unlivable — and a population of about 240 when the city went in. Since the redevelopment work was completed a decade ago, private developers have built 16 homes in Newlight on Brittingham Court.

Jean and Ed Chamberlin, who are white, bought one of those new homes — their first — to take advantage of a low-interest loan made possible by the Target Neighborhood Program. Ed Chamberlin is now vice president of the civic league, and the couple has made many friends among long-time Newlight residents.

"We don't consider it black or white over here; we're all just neighbors," he said.

Now, instead of worrying about overflowing septic tanks and muddy streets, Stancil, Chamberlin and civic league president Alice Green are concerned about traffic, a scenic borrow pit that was recently filled in, and encroaching business development along Indian River Road.

Before work began in Gracetown, just north of Thoroughgood Ele-

undeveloped, there were 65 homes, and most of the residents were black. Today, the number of homes has doubled and the racial mix is almost evenly split.

Despite the growth, Gracetown has kept its neighborhood feel, residents say. Last fall, as Gracetown resident John Hettel loaded his belongings into a moving van to prepare for a transfer to Florida, he talked with regret about leaving his home.

"The worst thing is leaving this neighborhood and these neighbors," Hettel said, as two men from down the street helped him stack furniture in the van. "It feels like a little community on its own, like it's not a part of anywhere else."

Most of Gracetown's new houses have been built by newcomers to the neighborhood, a sign, city officials say, that their efforts have taken hold.

"New, privately built homes means that people like the neighborhood and want to live there," said Andrew M. Friedman, director of the city's department of housing and neighborhood preservation.

It also means more freedom for long-time residents who now own land someone else is willing to buy.

Most of the vacant land was undevelopable — and therefore unsealable — before, because owners couldn't get permits for septic tanks. They couldn't even build houses for their children who wanted to stay in the neighborhood.

Their property is worth a lot more now, according to Virginia Beach City Real Estate Agent James C. Lawson, who spent the first decade of his 22-year tenure with the city working on the Target Neighborhood Program.

However, the city has not kept detailed before-and-after property value information, and has not done a comprehensive update of the

mid-80s.

"The housing stock alone, before the city went in with the HUD funds, a lot was just in real bad shape," Lawson said. "We've gone from having neighborhoods that were in decline, to now you've got new housing stock and the existing stock has been upgraded and rehabbed."

"In most cases now, the (target) neighborhoods are some of the nicest you will find in the city."

Virginia Beach leaders say they never want to undertake a massive redevelopment effort like the Target Neighborhood Program again.

In the future, the city needs to work with neighborhoods before they fall so far behind their surrounding communities, Council member Louisa M. Strayhorn said.

With Target Neighborhoods, "we're tackling the problems after the fact," Strayhorn said.

The council, with Friedman's help, is trying to come up with ways to identify warning signs, so problems can be addressed before they require a \$50 million fix. The city's role, she and Friedman said, is to provide neighborhoods with the basics they need to thrive.

"Fixing the physical aspects of a neighborhood doesn't guarantee that neighborhood problems will disappear," Friedman said, "but we think that it's one of the bases that make neighborhood success possible."

That philosophy seems to have worked in Newsome Farm, where, once the city's work was completed, the residents stepped in to maintain their community.

"There have been so many positive changes," Sadye Shaw said. "And the change of the residents' attitudes has been tremendous."

Staff writers Lori Denney, JoAnn Clegg, Debbie Messina and Lewis Krauskopf contributed to this report.

The locations of two neighborhoods have meant that they've been left behind in the program.