

# Change has come slowly to Queen City

For years, the enclave lacked so many basic services that most people forgot it was there.

BY TOM HOLDEN  
STAFF WRITER

Tucked away in the corner of the city lies a neighborhood so little known that it often does not appear on city maps.

Its homes are modest affairs, usually single-story bungalows that hug the four narrow streets that comprise Queen City's roadways.

Some homes are only relics, having been abandoned to rot by people who took with them the small personal histories that helped shape this small black neighborhood straddling the Virginia Beach and Chesapeake city lines.

But other homes are neatly cared for and show a devotion that is partially tied to the community's status as a target neighborhood.

Twenty years ago, the city embarked on a campaign to improve 12 low-income neighborhoods left behind in the building boom that transformed mostly rural Virginia Beach into a thriving suburb and the state's most populous city.

Using federal money and a good portion of its own, the city invested \$50 million in these neighborhoods, adding paved streets, curbs, storm sewers, lighting and other "amenities" that are common in other neighborhoods.

Like all of the target neighborhoods, Queen City was in desperate need of attention. For years, the enclave of 33 homes lacked so many basic services that most people forgot it was there. But not Ernest Benson Sr., president of the Queen City Civic League, who is otherwise known as the "Mayor of Queen City."

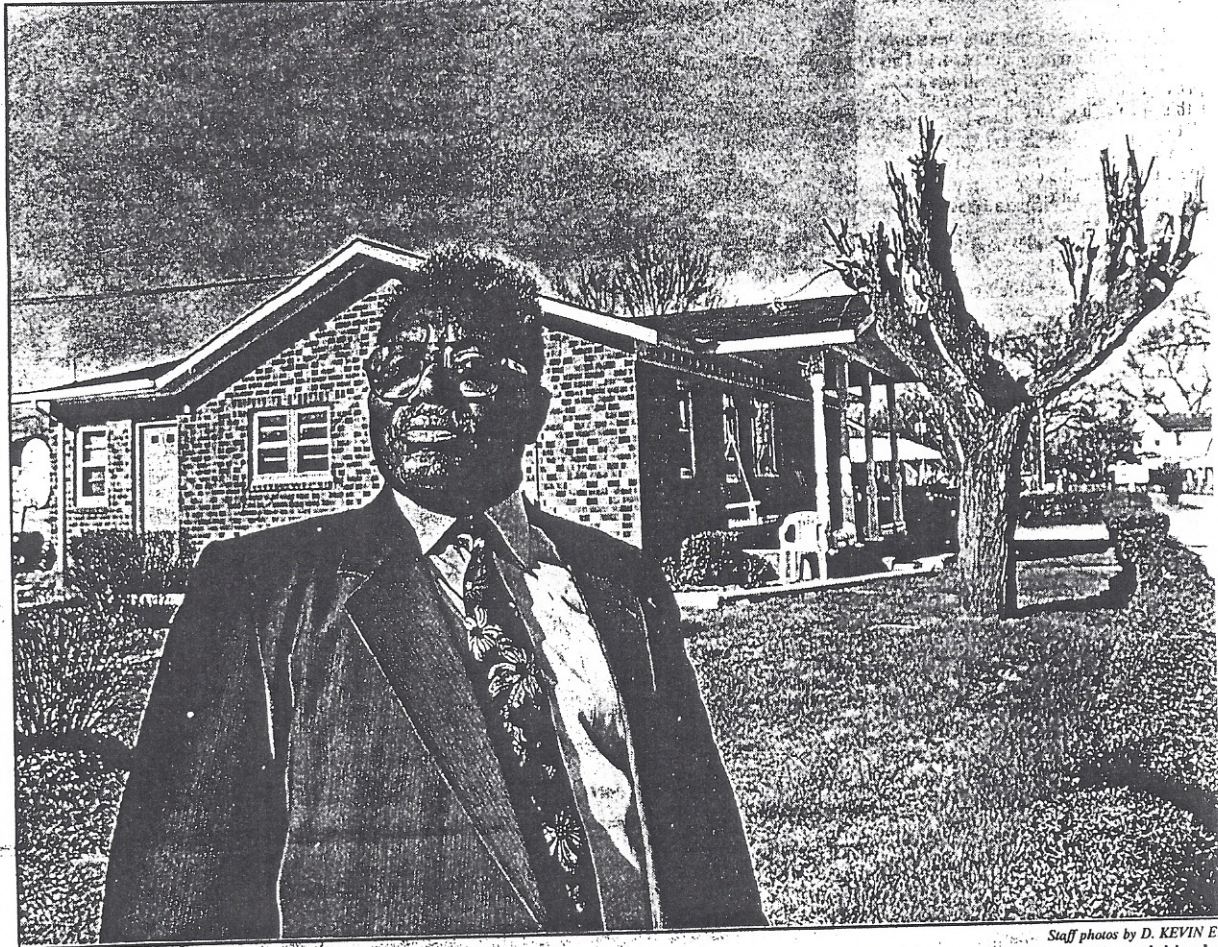
A 67-year-old resident who was born in the neighborhood, Benson has been widely regarded as the driving force behind much of the transformation of Queen City into a pleasant enclave that is making strides to improve even more.

"We're very much pleased with what the city has done," said Benson, a compact man whose front porch is framed by 220-year-old wooden timbers he salvaged from a demolished Norfolk house.

"Before the city work, this place was run down and there were people here who just didn't have the money to make improvements to their homes," he said. "So the federal money has been a big help."

The first obstacle to receiving federal aid for homes was making sure that all houses were connected to city water and sewer — no small feat in a community that at the time lacked pavement on some roads.

Benson's sister, who lives next door and was born in her family's home, now demolished, was also happy about what had been done.



Staff photos by D. KEVIN EL

Ernest Benson Sr., 67, president of the Queen City Civic League, is otherwise known as the "Mayor of Queen City." Born in the neighborhood, Benson has been widely regarded as the driving force behind much of the ongoing transformation of Queen City into a pleasant little enclave.

despite the long wait.

"I think it's wonderful," said Corrine Cuffee, a soft-spoken mother of four. "I thank the Lord I have lived this long. He is still blessing me."

Benson, like Cuffee, knows something about patience. Not only was federal money slow to come, but the city had problems, too, owing to uncertainties involving property lines and titles.

He has held firm and patient while the city promised progress but was slow to deliver.

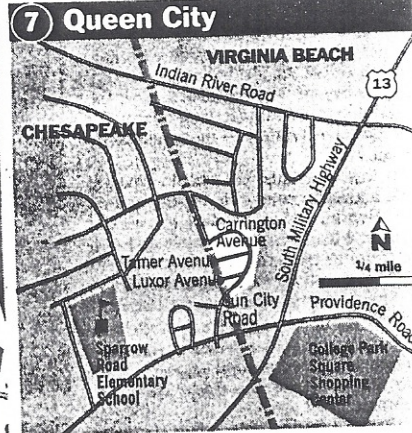
Andrew Friedman, director of the city's Department of Housing and Neighborhood Preservation, once called Benson the "neighborhood spark" who kept after the city to get things done.

"He's very civic minded," said Sharon K. Prescott, housing development coordinator with the city's housing department. "He's been very active in the citizens advisory committee, and he's worked very hard to see they got a city park out there. He is certainly interested in the welfare of his community."

To date, the city has spent \$297,908 in housing repairs, averaging about \$10,000 per home — a figure that does not include the three new houses the city built to



- 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



**About Queen City**

- Houses at start: 33
- Occupied houses deemed uninhabitable: 12
- Population at start: 106
- Percentage of land undeveloped: 45%
- Work completed: Water, sewer, drainage, housing work complete. Streets to be completed next year.
- Public money invested: \$750,000 so far.



This is the of 10 profi city's Targ Neighbor Next: A lo Reedtown Sunday's Beacon.

Please see following page

## SPECIAL REPORT: TARGET NEIGHBORHOODS

*Continued from previous page*

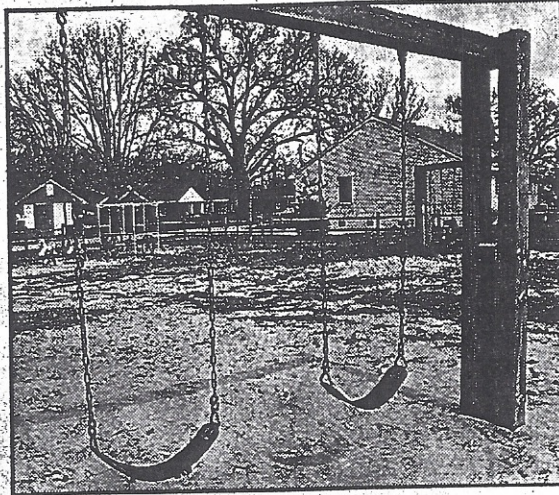
replace a like number that were razed because they were deemed beyond repair.

City records also show that \$1,158,186 has been spent to improve the city's drainage, streets, water and sewer services. A final street improvement project is planned for this spring and once it is completed, the overall restoration of Queen City will end.

In 1993, the city opened the community's first municipal park on a lot that once belonged to E.F. "Buddy" Redfearn, who bought the parcel in 1976 for \$2,400. After paying taxes on it for years, he decided to donate the property to the city. After the city took title to the land, a volunteer work detail from the Virginia Air National Guard pitched in to help build the park.

The project is but one of several improvements that have helped transform the community. Neighbors all seem to know each other and on any given day they are out and about doing chores and talking to each other.

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idated garages, sheds and helped clean up yards. There are 21 clients in Queen City — people who have had some work done to their homes — and two projects are still under way.

Two houses are awaiting demolition and replacement while one parcel has three structures on it that will be removed. That owner will likely subdivide the property and possibly build more homes.

"We are still working through some legal problems," Prescott said.

**Some homes in Queen City have been abandoned. Last year, the city tore down three houses and rebuilt them. The city also has razed numerous dilapidated garages, sheds and helped clean up yards.**

