

ON RIDGE AVENUE, PROGRESS WOULD GO BY THE INITIALS "PHA"

Matt Gelb, Philadelphia Inquirer

June 3, 2015

From Bruce Webb's chair, pulled to the entryway of his record and cassette store on Ridge Avenue, the decay is inescapable. Across the street, a faded sign for Irv's Meat Market & Delicatessen boasts, "Home of the Giant Hoagie." Next door, Ahn's Fresh Fish & Produce is for sale. Both stores are vacant, and have been for years. One recent day, Webb saw two younger men photographing the crumbled Irv's storefront. Speculators, Webb dubbed them.

"It's just a matter of time," Webb, 81, said. "Change is coming." The source of that proposed change to a once-vibrant business corridor that stretched from Girard College to Cecil B. Moore Avenue is an unlikely one: the Philadelphia Housing Authority.

The agency, using federal and local money, seeks to remake an entire neighborhood. It will acquire through eminent domain more than 1,300 properties in Sharswood - most of which are vacant, tax-delinquent, or city-owned. This fall, the Blumberg towers are scheduled to be demolished and replaced over time by 1,203 homes and apartments.

But the project extends beyond housing. The PHA wants to build its headquarters on Ridge Avenue. About 300 of the parcels to be acquired sit on the Ridge Avenue corridor. Kelvin Jeremiah, the PHA's president, has visions of a business district - complete with a supermarket, small shops, chain stores, and jobs - all sparked by his agency. It is a bold idea, one that Jeremiah called "the single most important redevelopment in the city." City Council President Darrell L. Clarke, whose district contains the land, secured tax breaks for it.

Business owners who remain along Ridge voice skepticism. "Until it happens," said Alex Chung, an employee at Vince Beverage on Ridge, "we're not holding our breath." Webb predicts that "yuppies" - his shorthand for yuppies and hippies - will populate Ridge with their "boutiques." The locals wonder: Who will benefit when a housing agency creates a commercial district?

"What we have done, whether wrong or right, was to redevelop housing on existing sites that we owned," Jeremiah said. "But those housing units were not supported by commercial corridors. There were no economic activities happening. "We are putting our money where our mouth is by investing in that community because we believe in the community and the potential that exists there."

The PHA's future home is a fallow field, bounded by Oxford and Jefferson Streets, and lined by tall trees and a horse-country fence. Loud music flows from the Travelers Motorcycle Club, a private after-hours bar. It is one of the few buildings still standing on the 2000 block of Ridge.

Riots along Columbia Avenue (now Cecil B. Moore Avenue) in 1964 emptied hundreds of businesses, including some on Ridge, and a working-class neighborhood eroded. The Blumberg towers, built at 23d and Jefferson Streets in 1969, concentrated poverty and crime. Since then, development has surged to the west (Brewerytown), east (Temple University), and south (Francisville). But not in Sharswood, where entire blocks remain vacant. "It offends my sensibilities that we can be eight to 10 blocks from Center City," Jeremiah said, "and have that level of despair."

The first phase of new housing - 57 affordable rentals built by Domus for \$21 million - is to begin construction in July. Subsequent phases plan for market-rate housing. Jeremiah wants the PHA's new offices completed by the end of 2016. "Those 1,400 employees alone need lunch," Jeremiah said. "They need a place to get dry cleaning. They need banks. That's what we're doing."

The PHA will apply for a \$30 million grant through Choice Neighborhoods, a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development program. It plans to invest hundreds of millions of its own funds, Jeremiah said. Much of the 2000 block of Ridge was designated a Keystone Opportunity Zone, effective a year and a half ago, at Clarke's request. The area, totaling 6.5 acres, receives greatly reduced or tax-free status through 2023.

"If the dollars come through, this could move real fast," said Bernard Savage, director of projects and real estate at Beech Interplex, a community nonprofit.

Karen Black, an urban-studies professor at the University of Pennsylvania, said partnerships will be crucial for the PHA - a neophyte in commercial development - to implement its plan and avoid others' mistakes. "Moving any business, including a government office, can make a difference," said Black, a housing and community-revitalization consultant. "This area needs investment. It just needs well-considered investment that benefits the existing residents."

One PHA drawing shows a ShopRite supermarket on the grounds of the agency's new headquarters. Jeff Brown, the owner of several local ShopRites that target low-income areas, lauded Jeremiah's ideas. "But," Brown cautioned, "it's way too premature to know if we can do a deal there."

The salmon cheesesteak, for \$13, is the most popular item at Bella's Breakfast & Lunch. Demetrius Goude-lock stir-fries the fish with broccoli, green peppers, and mushrooms. "We started it," crowed Goude-lock, 32, a cook for seven years. There are no sit-down restaurants on Ridge. Bella's, two doors up from Irv's, has survived for 14 years. The community has been good to Bella's, Goude-lock said. It could support other businesses.

An entire block along Ridge - between 21st and 22d, and Oxford and Nicholas Streets - is left untouched by the PHA's acquisition plan. That includes Bella's, Webb's, and Korman's Discount, which advertises "Hardware, Hair & Wigs" on its marquee. Once the Blumberg towers fall, property values in the Sharswood area should skyrocket. By not snatching land on this swath of Ridge, the PHA entices outside development. "If you live here," Goude-lock said, "you should benefit."

Another rendering distributed by the PHA imagines a tree-lined Ridge at 22d. Gone is Korman's. It is replaced by a store called "Local Harvest" that invites passersby with fresh produce. "We see small businesses as being part of what would be a rebuilt commercial corridor," Jeremiah said. "Our goal is not to displace them, but to create a better market condition for them to be able to succeed at a larger scale."

Stephanie Hardy, a Temple student adviser, bought a storefront on the 2200 block of Ridge in 2013 and moved in upstairs. She wants to open a cafe. But first, she said, patrons of the block's three stop-and-go's must stop urinating on her door. "What kind of businesses are we bringing?" said Hardy, 55. "We have the talent in our neighborhood to have some quality establishments." At nearby Ann's Nails, customers line up an hour before its 9 a.m. opening. "People from around the city come," Hardy said. "They are famous."

That property, at 2234 Ridge, has been home to Ann's for more than 20 years. The PHA will soon own it through eminent domain.