

Say “Community”

Ken Smith

West Side New Beginnings (WSNB) began in the late 1980s to tackle community problems of crime, drugs, and education of the children of the community. Since then, it has had numerous successes, including the construction of a community center, development of high-quality after-school and summer programs for neighborhood youth, and needed sewer and road repairs. Directed by a predominantly resident Board, WSNB’s programs serve the West Rehoboth community, particularly its children. West Side New Beginnings has a strong history of partnership with local churches and other community organizations, evidenced now in the variety of partners and supporters it has gathered for the development of a community land trust over the course of just a few months.

Situation

West Rehoboth is facing a speculative real estate market driven by the perception that it is a neighborhood in decline. Absentee and investor buyers are pursuing and purchasing properties at astounding prices. Recently, this has increased dramatically. A lot that sold for \$17,000 in May 2003 is just down the street from a lot of the same size that sold for \$136,000 in May 2004.

West Rehoboth is a community that has been isolated from its

neighbors. The community is surrounded by a cinder block wall on two sides, and entrance to West Rehoboth is limited to an inconvenient circuitous feeder road off Route 1. Residents have requested and been promised a second means of entrance and egress from the community, something which would not only increase its accessibility but also help in combating drug traffic. The promise has not yet been kept.

It has been literally walled in by high-tone real estate development, surrounded by expensive resort homes, from new townhouses starting at \$350,000 to townhouses and single family homes in the development Canal Corkran that exceed \$500,000 and \$1 million respectively. But on the other side of the wall, West Rehoboth residents live with no sidewalks, no streetlights, neglected “investment” properties and some roads that are virtually unnavigable.

Meanwhile, decent and affordable housing is nowhere to be found in the resort area. West Rehoboth is one of the last remaining areas near Rehoboth where housing for working families has not yet been replaced with resort development. In response to this, the WSNB Board of Directors created a Housing Committee that has been working with a variety of partners and friends to develop a plan to meet the community’s needs and insure its survival.

Vision

While others have tended to see West Rehoboth as a neighborhood on the brink of disappearance, West Rehoboth residents and leaders know it is a close-knit and vibrant community, the loss of which would be a tragedy both to its residents and the broader community. They see the future West Rehoboth as a thriving neighborhood where working families can continue to live affordably. Where a developer might envision luxury condominiums, they envision an inter-generational community with children playing in front of modest new homes. They see streetlights and sidewalks, affordable homes and a playground, cooperation and community.

Community Land Trust

West Rehoboth needs affordable housing and to insure that its community survives. This means that the effort to create affordable housing must last long into the future. The West Rehoboth Community Land Trust (WRCLT) is a nonprofit, community-controlled organization that will hold land in trust for the long-term benefit of the community. The WRCLT will also function as a nonprofit housing developer, rehabilitating or developing affordable housing on its land. Homes will then be sold to low-income homebuyers, who enter into a long-term ground lease with the CLT for the use of the land. The ground lease includes resale restrictions to insure that the home remains affordable to the next family, perpetually.

As homebuyers are purchasing only the home and not the land, this can make homeownership much more affordable to low-income families. The WSNB Housing Committee feels that these benefits of 1) safeguarding against gentrification; 2) preserving land for the community;



Shirley Paynter, WRCLT Board President (left) and board member, Darlene St. Peter