

McKenzie Court Hope VI Press Summary

As the largest and second oldest public housing development in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, McKenzie Court has a rich history. Constructed in 1952 during a “separate but equal” period of government programs, McKenzie Court was built for African-Americans as a sister development to Rosedale Apartments, built for the city’s white population. The development was named to honor Dr. Andrew B. McKenzie, one of the first African-American doctors in the city. At the time it was constructed, the 340 units of McKenzie Court represented the best housing available for the African-American population – either public or private sector. With indoor plumbing, modern appliances, and weather tight construction, McKenzie Court gave residents a home that was far better than any other housing available, and soon it emerged as the center of activity for a vibrant West Tuscaloosa community.

In the mid to late 1970’s, McKenzie Court began to decline as the residents recognized the deficiencies in the development. Many African-American residents moved from McKenzie Court seeking to take advantage of new housing opportunities resulting from the Civil Rights movement, thereby changing the social fabric of the neighborhood. This population shift led to the neighborhood’s further deterioration and eventually, to the disinvestment of local government and private businesses. Over time, not only has the government’s “separate but equal” policy changed, but attitudes about how “poor people” should be housed have also changed. McKenzie Court is now a deteriorated, outdated public housing complex that negatively affects the potential of West Tuscaloosa. While it

was once a source of pride in the African-American community to live in McKenzie Court, the development is now severely distressed due to significant deficiencies:

- **Construction:** Inadequate HVAC/ utility systems, mold/ mildew issues, lack of building insulation, water heater hazards, low-pitched roofs, inoperable windows, and foundation failures.
- **Site:** High population density, poor site design, inadequate utility infrastructure, insufficient parking, inaccessible for disabled residents, poor visibility of units, and severe site flooding.
- **Building Design:** Small units, inadequate room sizes, lack of defensible space, and unit isolation.
- **Environmental Hazards:** Severe site flooding, presence of lead- based paint, and potential presence of asbestos- containing materials.

THA seriously studied selective demolition and substantial rehabilitation but found it to be cost prohibitive and incapable of producing a marketable product for the long term. The McKenzie Court Revitalization Plan was developed with significant community and resident input, including open public discussions, surveys, and ongoing task forces. As a result, this plan is overwhelmingly supported by the residents, local government, and the community at large.

Today, May 17, 2005 the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has selected McKenzie Court as one of seven national recipients for a Hope VI Grant. The Hope VI Grant Program was developed as a result of recommendations by the National Commission on Severely Distressed Public Housing,

which was charged with proposing a National Action Plan to eradicate severely distressed public housing.

The Hope VI Grant will allow the Tuscaloosa Housing Authority to implement a plan conceptualized to revitalize West Tuscaloosa, creating a new community that exemplifies the concept of neighborhood, featuring the following characteristics:

- Construction of 234 new rental units and 28 homeownership units.
- New 10,000-square-foot community center with a centralized social services program office, meeting hall for 300, management/ leasing office, and a satellite branch of the city library system.
- McKenzie Commons, a two-acre Green-space with playground, walking paths and open-air pavilion that is centrally located and easily accessible to all residents.
- New classroom/ entry addition onto the existing community gymnasium.
- Compact, pedestrian- friendly site plan with well-lighted sidewalks, benches and landscaping.
- Variety of housing options for residents, including single-family attached town homes, multi-family walk-up apartment buildings, and single-family detached for-sale residences.
- Single-family for-sale residences in scattered parcels in the surrounding neighborhood.
- New rental community of 52 one-bedroom units, 108 two-bedroom units, 70 three-bedroom units and 4 four-bedroom units.

Relocation of current McKenzie residents has been and will remain a priority. Residents will be given the option to move to another housing community or accept a Section 8 voucher. A Relocation Plan has been established to ensure that each resident is accommodated with appropriate housing and social services. The Tuscaloosa Housing Authority will begin relocating residents as early as this fall.

The Revitalization Plan includes demolition of existing facilities in a two-stage process. Phase 2A will demolish twenty-three buildings containing ninety (90) apartments located north of the Community Center. A majority of the on-site street pavement and site improvements will be removed. A portion of the existing street alignments will remain while new parking areas are added. All utility infrastructures will be removed or capped and left in place with specifications for abandonment. This area will be replaced with the construction of 14 new buildings containing 92 apartments. This phase will begin mid 2006.

Phase 2B demolition will commence upon completion of Phase 2A construction. Phase 2B will demolish 63 buildings containing 250 apartments, the Community Center and small retail store. A majority of the on-site street pavement and site improvements will be removed. A portion of the existing street alignments will remain while new parking areas are added. All utility infrastructures will be either removed or capped and left in place with specifications for abandonment.

Procedures to minimize potential discomforts to area residents will be specified by the demolition-engineering firm and utilized by the contractors during the demolition process. All appropriate safety and health standards will be incorporated into the specifications. All demolition and debris removal will be specified to include constant

water spray. Noise pollution will be mitigated through monitoring of the work hours and methods of demolition. Compliance with all applicable federal, state, and local regulations will be maintained by utilization of the stipulated methods and specifications for the demolition process during the engineering review.

On behalf of the Tuscaloosa Housing Authority staff and the residents of McKenzie Court, we want to thank everyone involved in making this dream a reality. The success of this application was truly a collective effort.

For more information please call the THA Hope VI Coordinator, Debbie Esslinger, at (205) 758-6619 extension 114.