

We know we must correct historical failures.

Norfolk numbers among many American cities whose past efforts to develop or redevelop public housing have not done enough to sustain, protect, and support those who live there.

Systemic racism, redlining and other discriminatory housing practices entwined with geographic, economic and manmade barriers created generations of families afflicted by poverty, with residents of public housing cut off from the prosperity of other areas.

That history looms over efforts to transform the St. Paul’s area, beginning with the 618 units of public housing at Tidewater Gardens.

The residents of St. Paul’s – parents raising children, students and entrepreneurs, renters saving for a house, our neighbors, our families – drive this transformation. They will choose their futures.

We know we must get this right.

That is why [Norfolk’s strategy for St. Paul’s](#) distills to two words: **people** and **choice**.

Norfolk’s [People First](#) initiative directly addresses St. Paul’s residents’ desire for individualized, supportive services. Norfolk has dedicated \$3.5 million a year to provide family coaching and referrals, along with support for mobility and stability to improve lives, for every resident of Tidewater Gardens. This is one of the largest, most intensive resident-focused efforts in the country.

The City of Norfolk, NRHA and community leaders worked hard to obtain federal approval, endorsement, and funding for this project. Grants from the [Choice Neighborhoods Initiative](#) provide the means for residents to choose where they want to live.

Any resident who wishes to return to the St. Paul’s area can do so.

Norfolk’s City Council and the NRHA Board of Commissioners have adopted policies providing a **guaranteed** right to return for all Tidewater Gardens residents in good standing who desire to come back to the redeveloped community.

Residents can choose other housing options, including other NRHA communities, homeownership, rental housing without subsidy, or they can use a housing choice voucher.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development funding requires the city to build just what residents have asked for -- an affordable, livable community with a mix of subsidized, low-to-moderate income and market-rate housing. We know from redevelopment successes in Atlanta, New Orleans and elsewhere that the ratio to strive for is about a third of each type of housing.

Current plans include 541 units of subsidized and low-income housing on and offsite as part of the redevelopment of Tidewater Gardens.

In previous redevelopments, unfettered market conditions dictated builders’ plans, leading to new neighborhoods with affordability barriers that prevented many previous residents from returning. We have been adamant that is unacceptable with this project and we have the tools to guarantee affordability in the new housing units.

At the same time, resident surveys indicated about half of Tidewater Gardens residents wanted housing choice vouchers, and some residents have begun to relocate to other neighborhoods with the help of People First. Their [stories and first-hand accounts](#), available at www.stpaulsdistrict.org, differ substantially from the version

presented by recent media coverage and provide a powerful testament to the importance of our People First approach.

Residents of the area overwhelmingly support this plan.

Efforts to reimagine the St. Paul’s area began nearly two decades ago. Research and preparation included many discussions with the residents of St. Paul’s about their needs and dreams for their neighborhood. The plan that emerged – a mixed income, mixed use, pedestrian friendly neighborhood – captures residents’ vision.

Realizing their vision requires substantial changes to the infrastructure and housing in St. Paul’s, including demolition of the existing barracks-style buildings that have outlived their useful lives, and reconfiguration of the road network that has separated this neighborhood from Downtown, directly to the west.

Flood prevention must also be a priority. Tidewater Gardens was built in 1955 on a former creek bed prone to regular flooding that overwhelms storm drains and sewers and creating standing water that lingers for days. Norfolk’s plan for Tidewater Gardens reserves more than 26 acres for use as a resilient park that doubles as flood prevention infrastructure. All new housing will be lifted out of the floodplain.

Norfolk has committed \$85 million to this effort and new roads, sewer, water and stormwater lines to create a resilient, connected community.

We know we have more to do.

Our commitment to the residents of Tidewater Gardens will endure throughout the transformation and will continue for five years to ensure their continued success.

The federal department of Housing and Urban Development absolutely and strictly enforces its livability standards. We know this because of our efforts to help residents find acceptable properties to rent using vouchers. Some privately owned rental properties available to voucher holders have been unacceptable -- HUD vouchers cannot be used to place residents in derelict buildings.

We are addressing this challenge in several ways. NRHA conducts biennial inspections of properties for voucher holders. Norfolk’s Rent Ready program is designed to improve the quality of available rental units in our city. Each unit listed through Rent Ready has been assessed for livability.

Next, St. Paul’s Transformation staff has proposed incentives to induce more landlords to participate in the housing choice vouchers program, especially for units with four bedrooms or more and in neighborhoods with poverty rates below the citywide average.

All of our efforts tie directly to the people of Tidewater Gardens. We honor their families, their homes, their neighborhood and their futures. We commit everything we have learned, every ounce of effort from every agency across this city, as well as money, time and staff to ensure that the transformation of Tidewater Gardens provides the prosperity and opportunity its residents desire.



Dr. Chip Filer is the City Manager of Norfolk.



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