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Habitat Idea Could Help to Improve Communities

By Rebecca Yull
The Mailbox Post

VALDOSTA — Low income housing does not have to equal low quality housing.

Habitat for Humanity has challenged Valdosta to see if the city would like to rid itself of all sub-standard housing in the next 15 years. City Council members who were present at the April 27 meeting of community leaders showed a great interest in such a plan.

"We're interested. We just need you to tell us how we can get started," Councilman Willie Rayford told Clive Rainey who was representing Habitat for Humanity's international office.

"We're talking 1500 to 2000 houses," Valdosta-Lowndes County Habitat Executive Director Ralph Jackson said. "That would mean 100 houses a year."

The main areas of Valdosta with sub-standard housing are the west, east and south. Councilman Bunnis Williams, who represents the south side, has concerns about the conditions people in his district are living in. Some realtors have started to say Building Inspector Richard Joiner is being unfair to them regarding their houses they have for rent in that area, Williams said. "We have to have low income housing on the south side," one man told council members at their April 22 meeting.

But Williams does not think low income housing has to mean low quality. "Some people are saying give us a break, but they're raggedy houses," he said.

The Habitat initiative would not only build better houses, but better communities, Rainey said at his presentation. "We will have gotten rid of the shacks," he said, "and that's going to be a great attraction to people."

NAACP seeking trial on campaign financing

Civil rights group wants state to level playing field

ATLANTA (AP) — The state should be forced to level the playing field between rich and poor candidates by spending public funds on political races, lawyers representing the Georgia NAACP told a federal appeals court Tuesday.

"If you do not have as much money as your opponent ... you do not stand a chance of participating," Gregory Luke, a lawyer with the Boston-based National Voting Rights Institute, told a three-judge panel of the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

"What we are dealing with here is a lockout from the political process."

The Georgia case is part of a national movement in courts, legislatures and Congress to launch public financing of political campaigns.

The Voting Rights Institute has handled similar cases in New York, Ohio and California. It has yet to win.

The Georgia case was dismissed without a hearing by a U.S. District Court judge last year, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People appealed.

The NAACP wants a green light from the appeals court to battle the state in a trial over the issue of public financing of campaigns. The three-judge panel issued no ruling Tuesday.

The case centers on former state Rep. John White's loss to then-Sen. Mark Taylor for Taylor's southwest Georgia Senate seat in 1996. Taylor, who is now lieutenant governor, outspent White \$270,000 to \$16,000 in a campaign marked by racial overtones as well as lopsided spending.

The NAACP said White's case is emblematic of campaigns across the state in which the candidates with the most money usually win.

"A person of modest means does not stand any reasonable chance...," Luke told the judges.

But Kathryn Allen, senior assistant attorney general, argued that it's not the court's job to force the state to level the playing field for political candidates.

Community/Region

6A — Thursday, May 27, 1999

The Valdosta Daily Times

Lowndes native becomes first African American principal in Crisp County

By Tony Pipia

THEMES IN SOUTH GEORGIA

CORDELE — Lowndes County native Jerome Register will be bringing innovative ideas and more than a decade of practical experience to the job as Crisp County High School's first black principal.

Register was tapped for the position during a special called meeting of the Crisp County Board of Education Wednesday.

The appointment is effective July 1.

Register said he is looking forward to working with the staff at CCHS and is ready to address is-



Jerome Register

such as teen pregnancy and high school drop out rates to develop new strategies.

He said that using more advanced seniors as tutors and mentors for high-risk students on lower levels is a good approach toward keeping those students on campus longer. Students can be a valuable resource because they sometimes are more effective at communicating with each other, he said.

Crisp County Superinten-

dent J. Vann Sikes said Register stood out among the candidates because of "his positive personality, his enthusiasm and commitment.

He just has a very spellbinding philosophy," Sikes said. "Another thing is his outstanding references and people giving specifics. One, for example, said, 'if I had to go to battle I would want Jerome Register with me.'"

Register graduated from Val-

dosta State University. He is presently attending VSU working toward a PhD in educational administration. He was the Assistant Principal of Valdosta High School from 1989 to 1997, where he gained experience in alternative education.

He also served as Assistant Principal of Tift County High School and as director of Tift County's Alternative Night School program from 1997 to the present.

THE VALDOSTA DAILY TIMES

Jeffrey L. Heard
Publisher

Stephen T. Meadows
Managing Editor

Heard and Meadows join Juana Jordan, Brian Lawson, Edith Smith, Mae Stokes and Lou Ziegler of *The Valdosta Daily Times* and Greg Lofton of Valdosta on the newspaper's editorial board. "Our Opinions" are formed by that board.

Treat children as the prized possessions they are

What is wrong with our society today? Why are our kids shooting kids? Can we really lay the blame on guns and gun control? Certainly guns can kill, but only if a human finger pulls the trigger.

So why are our kids having the desire to get their hands on a weapon that can hurt or kill other people? As parents we need to ask ourselves this and come up with an honest answer.

In this fast-paced, stressed-out world we live in, we don't take enough time for our children. We're racing off to work, business meetings, nightclubs or wherever. Always busy. So where are our kids? What are they really doing? Who are they really with? Are we just too busy to really know?

They could be sitting in their rooms with a heart overflowing with thoughts and problems that someone needs to listen to. They don't want to burden over-worked parents. So it builds and builds inside them until something explodes. Then they go to extremes and are hell-bent on destruction. Then they get the attention they have thirsted for — the wrong kind of attention.

Wake up, fellow Americans. Skip that meeting. Talk to your kids. Get counseling if needed. Take the family on a picnic. Discipline them. Hug them. Show them you love them everyday. Let them get their attention at home. Then, hopefully, they won't have the urge to have a loaded gun in their hands at all. They can have peace within their souls.

Our children are the most precious beings in our life. They are our top priorities. They are priceless. Take care of them first.

Jo Barrentine
Valdosta

Reader questions Weed and Seed report

I would like to respond to the article about the Weed and Seed program in the Valdosta area. I am a student at Valdosta

State University and have been involved in one of the Weed and Seed programs, which is entitled the "Granny Program." I was present at many functions of the planning of the program before it actually became a reality.

Much of what Karen Rogers, from Atlanta, had to say is nothing more than people in the "target-area" communities have not already voiced. However, when they (you know, the "non-important folks," a.k.a. the community people) stated various inconsistencies they saw, their voices were not only ignored but muffled.

For instance, Ms. Rogers stated that the program was too top heavy. She also mentioned it needed input from the neighborhood. Several of the things that she has stated had been talked about in many of the various community meetings. I am also very interested in the fact that your report spent a great deal of time pointing blame to the two lowest paid — by funding from the program — individuals, particularly Deloris Mitchell Brown, who actually lives in one of the sites.

What your paper does not point out is that the current Valdosta Weed and Seed committees, mainly the steering and executive, have only, to my knowledge, a very small representation of individuals that actually live in the community sites.

Furthermore, you do not point out that two individuals in the program make more than \$30,000 a year and neither live in the community sites.

Another concern in your coverage of such a widely encompassing community effort has been downplayed. I would assume that your institution has an obligation to the ethics of journalism to convey an all-inclusive story about such a highly profiled program as Weed and Seed. As an inquiring reader, I am interested in knowing why salaries, financial benefits and other resources of those in highly regarded (political and otherwise) positions were not disclosed.

I don't know, but your report appears too top heavy.

Ronjii Milledge
Valdosta

Policy keeps 14 Lowndes students out of graduation ceremony

By Weenam Chua
THE VALDOSTA DAILY TIMES

VALDOSTA — Lowndes High School students who failed some portion of the Georgia High School Graduation Test aren't joining their peers at the graduation exercise today.

The Lowndes school board issued its decision Thursday.

"We had considerable discussion about whether some high school students should walk at graduation," Hagler said.

Local school policy requires 12th-graders to pass all state requirements to obtain a high school diploma if they want to participate in graduation exercises. This is the first year the policy has been enforced and 14 students are affected.

None of the board members spoke up when board chair Glenn Copeland asked if there was any discussion.

Some of the parents of the affected students looked perplexed with the silence and absence of a motion.

When the board moved on to other items of the agenda, the parents left quietly.

"These students passed the 12th grade," said Lynn Sapp, mother of a student prohibited from joining the exercise, in a telephone interview Friday. "They don't have another opportunity to walk. They don't get to

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Policy

celebrate with their friends. (The board) has taken the joy out of school."

Depending on which set of numbers one looks at, Lowndes High School students have either posted a gain or a loss in terms of the percentage of 11th-graders who pass the high school exit exams this year.

"The scores at LHS continue to improve," said Reuben Jenkins, assistant superintendent for instructional services, at the called meeting for the Lowndes School Board.

That's true, looking at the percentage of first time passes for the all of the 11th-grade stu-

dents. Ninety percent of students passed the mathematics test on first administration compared to 88 percent last year.

The school showed its highest gains in social studies with 83 percent, compared to 80 percent last year.

The same percentage of students, 95 percent, passed the English content area test the last two years.

The proportion of students who passed the science tests on first administration also stayed the same at 78 percent.

However, data that excludes students in special education programs shows a slight decline

in English and science but an increase in social studies. The percentage of regular program students passing as first-time test takers fell by 1 percent for English, from 97 percent to 96 percent, and for science, from 81 percent to 80 percent.

Social studies posted a gain of 2 percent to 84 percent while mathematics remained the same at 91 percent.

Either sets of data still show Lowndes 11th-graders on par or outperforming the state average on the four content area tests.

To contact Weenam Chua,
please call 244-3400, ext 237.

Putting homes on vacant lots

Local initiative seeks to eliminate poverty housing by the year 2015

By Brian Lawson
THE VALDOSTA DAILY TIMES

VALDOSTA — Isaiah Isom has a beautiful dream.

It includes a community united in its efforts to get rid of houses that are simply unfit for families to live in.

In place of those leaking, rotting, unsafe structures, Isom imagines new homes, constructed in a labor of love, providing sanctuary and stability to families who have never known such things were possible.

Isom imagines a Valdosta that is known across America for its remarkable and rare success in doing away with poverty housing.

Isom, a 10-year board member for the Valdosta-Lowndes County affiliate of Habitat for Humanity, has seen many ups and downs during that time on the board and knows the dream is somewhere off in the distance. But he is also convinced it is possible.

"I am elated by what is coming," he said. "This is a big project and it will take a total community effort — industry, governments, agencies. It is a wonderful thing."

Isom's dream has been distilled into an "initiative" by the local Habitat chapter to eliminate all substandard housing in Valdosta by 2015. According to Ralph Jackson, the local executive director for Habitat, it includes between 1,500 and 2,000 homes. And it means building about 100 houses per year at an average cost of \$30,000 per home.

The effort has been endorsed by the Habitat for Humanity International office, the city of Valdosta, United Way of Lowndes County and the Weed and Seed initiative.

Can it happen?

In building 16 houses in just over two years, the local affiliate faced difficulties in coordinating



Paul Leavy/The Valdosta Daily Times

The final home in the Valdosta-Lowndes County Habitat Humanities "Sweet 16" neighborhood is suffering from delays in completion, in part due to below-code standard construction work by volunteers.

Habitat for Humanity International's Standards of Excellence

Best practices:

- Title transfer upon completion.
- Families volunteer with Habitat in construction, on committees and other activities — not to fulfill programmatic requirements but on a volunteer basis — after they have become homeowners.
- Homeowner applicants are selected whose

gross income is 25-50 percent of area median income.

- Congregational involvement in Habitat for Humanity is increasing.
- Affiliate has (or is developing) tangible and appropriate collaborative with other nonprofit organizations in area.

Source: Habitat for Humanity International

labor and payments from resident families and is still coping with a delay in completing the final house in the Sweet 16 neighborhood — in part due to below-code standard construction work by volunteers and the massive financial commitment such a project would require.

Angela Crance, executive director of the United Way of Lowndes County, said the com-

munity initiative will be supported.

"We're willing to support it because it's such a wonderful idea," she said. "It's a massive initiative and I don't know if we'll make it, but even if we build 100 houses it will improve things in this community. It says that people here care enough about the quality of life for the whole community that they will

support it. It makes me proud."

The local affiliate has seen a bit of a downswing over the past two years in its industry donations, according to its annual financial disclosure reports, and a substantial reduction in church donations. During that same time period, the chapter engaged in a blitz effort to build 16 houses and the 1997 figure reflects the aggressive fund-raising efforts.

For 1998, the local Habitat office received \$106,000 in company donations and in-kind services, and for 1997 received \$131,000, according to its records. In 1997, church donations were \$26,000, while in 1998 the listed church contributions were \$5,492. Personal donations were also down slightly from 1997 to 1998, with the chapter receiving \$12,241 in '97 and \$11,706 in '98.

Tar Drazdowski, president of the local chapter, notes the success or failure of the initiative will depend on how broadly it is based.

"This is not just a Valdosta-Lowndes County Habitat for Humanity initiative," she said. "We have a chance to be a catalyst for another organism, a community-wide organism working as one to make this happen."

Valdosta Mayor Jimmy Rainwater believes the initiative has a chance to succeed based on the local chapter's success in building houses and drawing support from volunteers.

"For years, we've had college students come down here and volunteer their time," he said. "I hear industry talk about its support for two programs, the United Way and Habitat. I think there is no question this is an idea everybody can get behind. If it is a viable project and people feel good about it, they will rally behind it. To take a vacant property, build a home there and put it on the tax rolls has a lot of meaning."

In order to overcome the admitted shortcomings produced by limited staffing, the local affiliate has to continue to evolve in its operation, Drazdowski said. That means more organization, more staff, active pursuit of grant funds and continued success in recruiting partners for the operation.

"There is nothing more exciting than rolling out the carpet on a house and hearing the owner say, 'I've never lived in a nice place, I never thought I would,'" Drazdowski said. "We want to make those kinds of dreams come true."

To contact reporter Brian Lawson, please call 244-3400, ext. 239.