

THE STATE

AREA SEEKS A REBIRTH

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Longtime residents of the Arthurtown community just south of Columbia remember growing up in a self-sufficient neighborhood with two grocery stores, a barbershop, a barbecue pit and Boogie's Grill nightclub.

They remember going to see two movies for 10 cents every Saturday night on a pull-down screen in a theater above the nightclub.

"Things were on the up and up back then," said Lucy Cochran, 74, who was born in Arthurtown.

But as Columbia and Richland County grew northwest toward Irmo and toward the Northeast, Arthurtown was overlooked.

It didn't receive water and sewer lines or paved roads, lighting and sidewalks that other communities got.

Businesses closed, people moved away, homes fell into disrepair and people began selling drugs on the streets.

A group of longtime residents never gave up on Arthurtown and fought for improvements with some success.

But there are still needs, and residents are hopeful about a Richland County plan to pump more than \$1 million in federal money into Arthurtown during the next five years.

The county qualified for the federal entitlement program after the 2000 census. The program is based on population and the percentage of low- to moderate-income people in the unincorporated part of the county.

The goal is a complete revitalization of Arthurtown.

The residents' response has been overwhelming. County officials received responses from 98 percent of the 120 households surveyed

about how they want the money to be spent.

"We're doing our part," said LeRoy Bolton, president of the ACTWORK community organization, which represents several neighborhoods along Bluff Road.

'WE'RE PAYING TAX DOLLARS'

Richland County extended sewer lines to Arthurtown in 1995 after a 20-year battle, which included numerous delays and allegations of racism.

The extended sewer fight mobilized residents of Arthurtown and other nearby communities to demand improvements.

Habitat for Humanity took notice and held the first of a series of building blitzes shortly after the sewer lines were connected.

Cochran's daughter, Sandra, who moved away after high school, was one of the first to move into a Habitat house.

"I really didn't care about my community. I just wanted to get away," Cochran, now 41, said. "But as I got older, I realized what a community stood for and what my parents and their parents worked so hard to give us."

The Habitat houses attracted new families to Arthurtown for the first time in several years.

In 1998, the Sheriff's Department launched its first community action team in Arthurtown to work with residents to step up patrols in the area.

"Five years ago you could drive through the community and (drugs) would be right in front of you," said Lt. Dennis Dodge, one of the original members of the CAT team. "Nobody had any fear."

Now, he said, residents "have taken the streets back."

But residents say they still see groups of young men loitering in the streets, sometimes blocking cars from passing. They hope more improvements to the neighborhood will drive the dealers away.

In 2000, the United Way of the Midlands opened a child development center.

The improvements have attracted some former residents like Cochran and some new residents.

Bolton said the improvements over the past 10 years came because neighborhood groups regularly attended County Council meetings and didn't let council members forget their promises.

"We were pretty persistent," Bolton said.

But five of the community's 10 roads are still unpaved, residents have to drive several miles to the nearest grocery store, and some are concerned that rebuilding a rundown basketball court - an idea being discussed - will attract outsiders selling drugs instead of kids looking for a pickup game.

The younger Cochran, who is the president of the homeowners' association, said getting public services shouldn't always be a struggle.

"We're paying tax dollars, but the services are not being rendered or being provided to us," she said.

'BECAUSE IT'S MY HOME'

Many Arthurtown community leaders supported a proposal by Myrtle Beach developer Burroughs & Chapin to build a \$1 billion development on 4,600 acres along the Congaree River just south of Arthurtown.

Arthurtown community leaders called the proposed Green Diamond development a blessing because of the developer's promises to help install traffic lights and build sidewalks in the community - amenities county officials had promised but never delivered.

Burroughs & Chapin planned to build a high-technology park surrounded by homes and a golf course, but critics said the property would flood.

When the plans fell through - partly because the county was reluctant to commit taxpayer money - Arthurtown leaders saw it as another slight.

"We got dumped on again," Bolton said. "The north side of Richland

County is always getting things left and right. Maybe some day somebody will do something with the southwest side of Richland County."

Now, with the money coming from the county, Arthurtown leaders see another opportunity for their community.

Residents working with county officials have identified several needs they would like to see the money used for.

They want to see roads paved, drainage pipes installed, sidewalks built, traffic lights installed and dilapidated houses restored. Residents would also like to see a park renovated and additional recreation facilities built. Ultimately, they would like to see more families and more businesses move back to the community.

Lifelong Arthurtown resident Rose Williams recently watched her 15-month-old grandson play in the Habitat house where she's lived for the last eight years.

"I'd like to see (Arthurtown) improved even if it's not for my children," Williams, 65, said. "I'd like to see it improved just because it's my home."

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ABOUT ARTHURTOWN

Richland County officials have compiled demographic information on Arthurtown collected from a community survey.

Population: 344

Median age: 54

Race: 330 are African American

Houses: 134

Unoccupied houses: 14

Median property value: \$59,000

Rentals: 17 percent

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