

Below is an op-ed article by Father Val which appeared in the Sunday, June 9th, issue of "The Daily Memphian."

A Future Tied to Its Past in South Downtown Memphis

In 1940, the first public housing developments in Memphis were built. The 900 units of Foote Homes were located just two blocks from where the FedEx Forum is. Foote Homes has a great legacy in Memphis as it was one of the vibrant centers of African-American life and culture. Located along Vance Avenue, it thrived from the 1940s through the 1960s. Civil rights icon, Congressman John Lewis, once called the land upon which the Foote Homes were built "Hallowed Ground." Foote Homes' residents were active in the civil rights movement, and many of the men among the striking sanitation workers in 1968 lived in the Foote Homes.

Within this past year, all the homes there have been leveled. In 2012, a majority of the Foote Homes residents wanted their homes to be salvaged, and redone like those on the north side of downtown, Lauderdale Courts (what is now called Uptown Square). St. Patrick's Catholic Church, with others, were part of that effort of the residents to keep their homes. For fifty years St. Patrick's has been closely linked with the residents of Foote Homes. The Director of Housing and Community Development in 2012, Robert Lipscomb, decided to keep with the plans to demolish the Foote Homes and make way for the new development.

Downtown Memphis is changing in many ways. New upscale housing and entertainment are seeing an upsurge of people returning to downtown. The area around the National Civil Rights' Museum (where Dr. King was martyred at the Lorraine Hotel) has become an example of "gentrification." Older buildings have been restored, newer ones built, and low-income residents have been replaced by higher-income newcomers. This example of gentrification is located very close to where the new development is being built at the site of the former Foote Homes.

The interfaith organization MICAHA (made up of more than 50 congregations and nonprofits, including St. Patrick's Catholic Church) is supportive of this mixed-income redevelopment at the former Foote Homes. It wants to make sure, however, that former Foote Homes' residents have real access to a significant number of these 912 new units under construction. City officials have admitted that, in the other six public housing projects that have been completely redeveloped, efforts failed in making sure that their former residents were successfully welcomed back. Not many of the former residents have actually returned.

MICAHA has worked with Marcia E. Lewis, chief executive officer of the Memphis Housing Authority, and with Paul Young, Director of the city's Office of Housing and Community Development—both of whom are overseeing this redevelopment of the former Foote Homes. In late October last year, at a MICAHA meeting of 1400 persons at Mason Temple (where Dr. King preached the night before his death) Ms. Lewis committed that there will be continued, and successful, ongoing work with the former Foote Home residents. A viable rent will be offered to these former residents, many of whom are included in the lowest rung of the income range. As a result, as Ms. Lewis publicly pledged, "360 former Foote Home households will become residents of the new development on the site of the former Foote Homes, if they so choose."

This area of massive redevelopment will be called "South City." However, as St. Patrick's Church subsequently called for, this new housing must not forget its rich legacy as the former Foote Homes. Recently, MHA and city officials have agreed to call this new housing "Foote Park at South City." We applaud that link with a rich past.

For decades, St. Patrick Catholic Church has seen itself "at the corner of prosperity and poverty." Literally across the street from the front of the church is FedEx Forum. Behind the church, however, has been the former Foote Homes and massive blight in the poorest zip code in the city, 38126. We look forward to a future which sees this slice of the city "at the corner of prosperity and promise."