

Heights rehabilitation a rocky path

By Regina Pettit, staff reporter

The Big Bad Wolf huffed and puffed and blew down the wooden house but couldn't budge the stone house. That old fairy tale would give some 300 Warminster Heights families who live in the wood frame housing nightmares.

Officials associated with the low-income housing development of Jacksonville Road talk proudly of a massive rehabilitation project for about 500 cinderblock units. The plan includes a \$3 million grant from the federal department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for 100 units in the center section.

But while the fate of the stone homes is secure, 266 families who live in the wood-frame homes must wait until August for a decision by architect Michael Marcelli, of Villanova, on whether their homes should be rebuilt or leveled.

As the study proceeds, many don't make improvements to their homes because of the possibility of demolition. And some are grabbing that possibility by the throat, saying they'll fight any decision by officials to tear down their homes.

Because an urban renewal plan drawn up in 1974 called for demolition of the frame units and construction of new housing in its place, the Bucks County Redevelopment Authority (RDA) has allotted a minimal amount of funding for improvement to the frame section.

As a result, many frame units have been rapidly deteriorating. Now, a committee of Heights and RDA officials say there is not enough money available for new housing.

And many frame units, they say, are in such poor condition that it would not be wise to pour money into them.

So, the committee is recommending change to the plan that might mean relocating some frame tenants out of the park and moving others into the cinderblock-housing section.

Either option angers some tenants, like Barbara Brossman, of Adams Avenue. Brossman, who raises her four children alone in a framed unit she called "well constructed", said aside from the fact she likes living there, a move to the masonry section might mean a smaller, cramped house for her family.

Three and four bedroom units are scarce and in demand according to Warminster Heights Director Steve Pollack. There will only be four, four-bedroom units in the Neighborhood Strategy Area, the central 100-unit section to be rehabilitated next summer, he said.

While Pollack acknowledged that problem he said it is difficult to address it now because every situation is hypothetical until the architect's decision.

Still, Brossman runs her own hypothetical situation through her head and becomes disgusted.

"To even think about taking down the frame units is a big mistake," she said from her living room. "This unit is well

constructed. I have a fireplace, baseboard heating and stormwindows.

"There are four bedrooms, a bathroom, a laundry room... I couldn't ask for more," she said adding she has worked full time as a nurses' aide at Neshaminy Manor while attending Upper Bucks Vo-Tech School part time for seven years to get a nursing degree.

Since Brossman moved to this unit a year ago from another frame unit in the same neighborhood where she spent 25 years, she has worked hard to fix it up.

"I wouldn't feel comfortable moving into the center," she said. "I'm happy where I am here. I have no gripes at all. I've had no problem with the management or with my neighbors."

Roots are a primary concern to frame tenant Albert Hare, of Osage Street. He lived for 12 years in the center of the park and three years in this unit and said this home is ideal.

"I could go elsewhere, but I'm rooted here," said Hare, whose unit houses seven children, ages 15 to 24.

Hare, a forklift operator at PennBox Corp., by day and security guard by night, said he believes officials realize some tenants have significant reasons for remaining in their homes, he thinks "they don't know how to straighten it out."

Mark Levin, Regional Housing Legal Service attorney and member of the committee reviewing the plan, said the committee realizes some of the frame units are in good shape and many frame tenants are members of the cooperative - which could ultimately own the project if enough people join.

"The units on Adams Avenue are some of the best in the Heights," said Levin. "But we can't answer today, 'yes this frame unit is going to be saved or not.'"

It bothers Don Hauser when he hears people speak about the Heights as one lump sum and ignore the fact that living in different sections makes a difference - even when it's his mother speaking.

Shirley Rivera, who lives next door to her son on Neil Street, said she believes it is a "disgrace" to level the frame sections "the way people are begging for housing."

But if she was forced to relocate within the development, she said she really wouldn't mind.

"I'm the type of person, my home is where I make it," she said.

"I disagree," Hauser said of his mother's statements. "There's a difference in the atmosphere (in his section.)"

Hauser repeated the fear of the unknown syndrome of many frame tenants who think they might be throwing good money away if they make improvements on their homes.

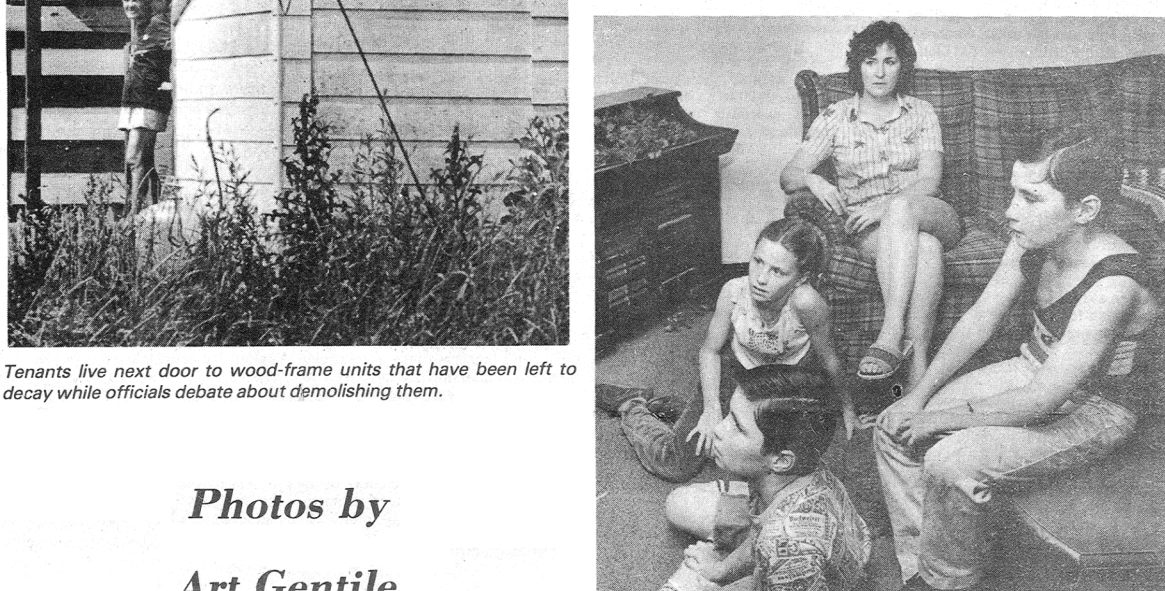
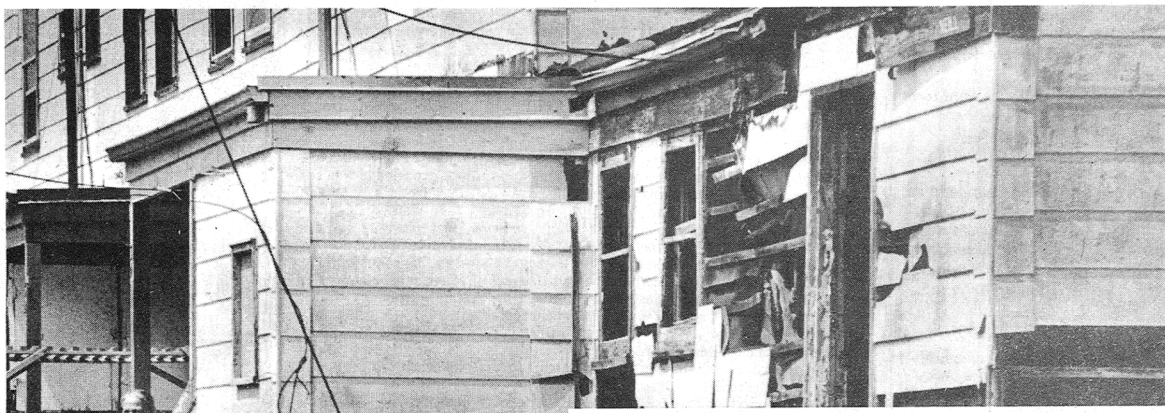
Hauser said he and his wife earn a total of \$20,000 a year and have two children. In the past, he said, he's done a lot of work on his home.

"I would have bought new aluminum windows" if he knew his house would be rehabilitated, he said.

Instead he waits.



Warminster Heights: Dreams vs. reality



Tenants live next door to wood-frame units that have been left to decay while officials debate about demolishing them.

Barbara Brossman, "Taking down the frame units is a big mistake."

Photos by
Art Gentile

Tenants would own complex

Housing coop a new step

By Regina Pettit, staff reporter

"Sometimes when I don't have much to do, I walk through Fulmor Heights... and dream."

Long-time Warminster Heights resident Raymond "Fuzzy" Klein has echoed the dream of hundreds of tenants who only have several miles to go to see a World War II housing project that has soared to success.

But Warminster Heights has years to go before it comes close to Fulmor Heights... the housing cooperative in Upper Moreland Township along Byberry Road. That project has been a cooperative since 1950.

If anyone complains because the two projects began at the same time and Warminster hung back like a skier downhill without skies, Klein advises them to get their bearings.

Thomas Gallagher, housing consultant for the county authority that owns the Heights, said Dr. Gabriel Elias, former owner of the property, brought the Heights to an all-time low by running the place like a slumlord.

"You started with the worst suburban slum in Pennsylvania," Gallagher said. "It may not look like much now, but you have to take a benchmark - where are you starting from?"

For now, most people would like to forget where it started and look forward to the Heights becoming a successful cooperative housing project.

Mark Levin, Regional Housing Legal Services attorney, seems to be the head cheerleader for that plan.

Seventy percent of the tenants, or about 500, are needed for the cooperative to buy the development from the Bucks County Redevelopment

Authority (RDA).

So far, Levin said 322 have paid the \$50 fee and 90 have paid a portion of it.

"We feel we'll have 500 in a year from now, and we'll probably do it faster than that," Levin said. "When people see the rehabilitation, that causes more people to join up. People start to feel left out by NOT being in the coop."

With a \$3 million federal Housing and Urban Development (HUD) bond, 100 masonry units in the center section of the Heights will be rehabilitated far beyond township standards, RDA officials said.

Rehabilitation work could begin next summer, depending on interest rates in the bond market. The application for the Neighborhood Strategy Area (NSA) projected anticipates a 10 percent interest rate. At present, the rate is more than 11 percent. If at the time of final approval of the application, expected in July, 1982, the rate is more than 10 percent, the RDA might go to the state Housing Finance Association for alternative financing, according to RDA officials.

In the meantime, the RDA is required by HUD to rehabilitate the surrounding masonry units that work will begin within the next year, officials said.

While tenants wait for the improvements, Levin and Heights Director Steve Pollack give them periodic pep talks, telling them they can be the owners of the sparkling new units if the coop pulls through.

"The universal opinion about the low-income cooperatives is that coop conversion has a drastic effect in cutting down vacancies, vandalism and delinquencies," Levin said.

He cited Armstead Gardens, in Baltimore, Md., and Pennypack Woods, in Philadelphia, as subsidized housing

developments turned coops with amazing turnaround results.

In the 2,500-unit Armstead Gardens, he said there was rampant vandalism and 400 families at a time behind in the rent. Vacancies spawned these

vandalism and financial problems, he said.

"Within six months (after coop conversion), there were no vacancies... there was a waiting list," Levin said. "Vandalism stopped overnight."

When the resident owns a share of the coop, he feels more like his unit is his and tends to take better care of it, Levin said.

Is Pollack as optimistic about the Heights coop future?

"I don't know if you could call it optimistic," Pollack said. "The coop has a long way to go, but I think it's conceivable they can do it. I certainly would never say it will never happen. There is quite a large group who want it to happen and do volunteer work to make it happen. I don't want to sell those people short."

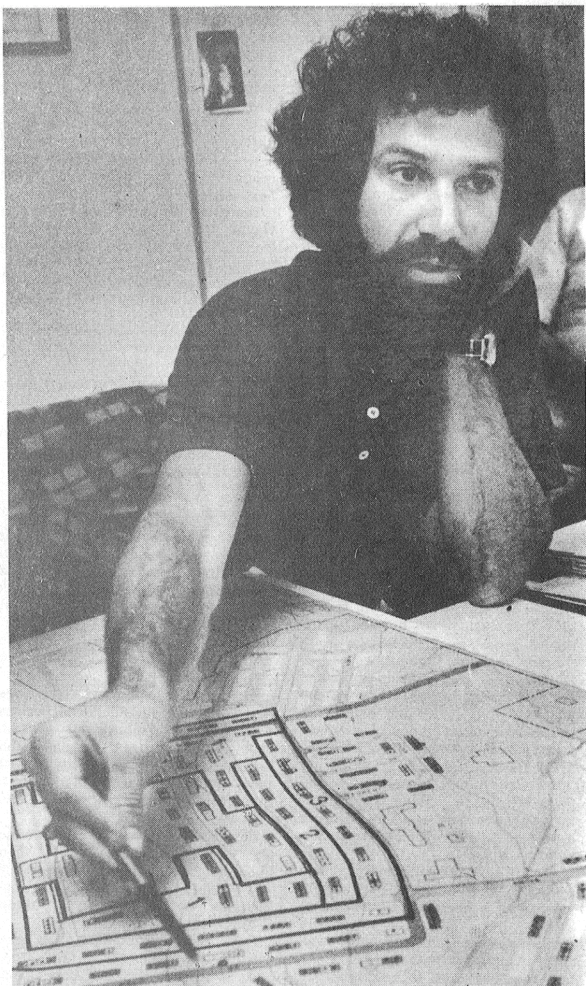
Levin currently is coaching a Tenant Selection Committee of about 19 Heights residents which will steer the housing development into the direction of the coop by screening prospective tenants.

A portion of that committee will interview the whole family or at least more of it, gauging their interest in the coop and assessing relevant characteristics of the family such as the behavior of the children, according to Pollack.

The committee also will check the family's income record and past performance in paying rent, he said.

If the Heights was sold to the coop, almost 100 percent of the tenants would have to be shareholders, Pollack said.

The Heights would receive less income from government and other outside sources because the federal Internal Revenue Service has a strict limit on the amount a cooperative can receive, Pollack said. So the more members the better, he added.



MARK LEVIN

... cheerleader for a better future.



STEVE POLLACK



Rose Vaughn: "I don't have that kind of money."



Sandra Waddell: "Maybe the troublemakers were made to move."

Heights 'bad reputation' a beast they aim to kill

By Regina Pettit, staff reporter

In Warminster Heights, they are trying to kill a beast. Despite their pounding, they admit he has a few good years left.

The beast is the reputation of the low-

income housing development, born of deplorable conditions existing when it was known as Lacey Park and for some time after.

Though he continually rears his ugly head among people perpetuating the bad reputation, people closely associated with the Heights say popular opinion is wrong.

"Certainly a majority of the people work," said Warminster Heights Executive Director Steve Pollack. "The image of Warminster Heights as residents being a lot of bums on welfare is just not accurate. Some are on welfare. A lot of the people who don't work have a medical problem or some real reason not to."

"I'm always amazed," Pollack said, "at the number of crutches I see when we go into the houses. I've never seen anything like it." He said the crutches indicated an abundance of sick and elderly.

"A number of the people here were coalminers in West Virginia or upstate Pennsylvania who have lung problems . . . We all know how coalminers have been taken care of," he said.

Certain statements often made about the Heights community are accurate.

One is that the people are in a very low income bracket. Mark Levin, a Regional Housing Legal Services attorney, said a survey shows that 75 percent of the families qualify for Section 8 federal subsidies and most of them, he said, are well below the mark for qualifying.

For a family of four, the maximum annual income allowable for the sub-



Warminster Heights: Dreams vs. reality

sidy is \$16,900. For a family of eight, the limit is \$21,100. Tenants pay up to 25 percent of their income for rent as the government requires. But Pollack said there is discussion in Washington about raising that to 35 percent.

Another accurate statement is no taxes are collected from the Heights. In lieu of taxes, a total of \$112,000 a year is paid to the county, township and school board.

But outside of the economic issues, the people are lost in stereotypes.

Warminster Police Chief Elmer Clawges said 10-12 percent of calls to the police come from the approximately 2,500 Heights residents.

"That is proportionate to the rest of the population," Clawges said. "Their population did not create any more problems than any other part of the township."

The early 70s, he said, was a period of proportionately higher arrests and criminal activity.

But Heights resident Sandra Waddell, of Evans Street, had to think back only "a couple of years ago when we had riots. It seems to be calming down some now. Maybe the troublemakers were made to move."

Though "serious" crime appears to be declining, there are other considerations, Waddell said. She recalled that when she moved into the Heights 15 years ago, "it was really nice." She said parents didn't let their children tear around the streets like they do today.

Sounding not unlike any township resident doing battle with vandalism and parents' leniency, Waddell complained about youths who went into her backyard while she was out and slashed a camping tent.

"If people would take more of an interest in what their children are doing, it would be a good place," she said.

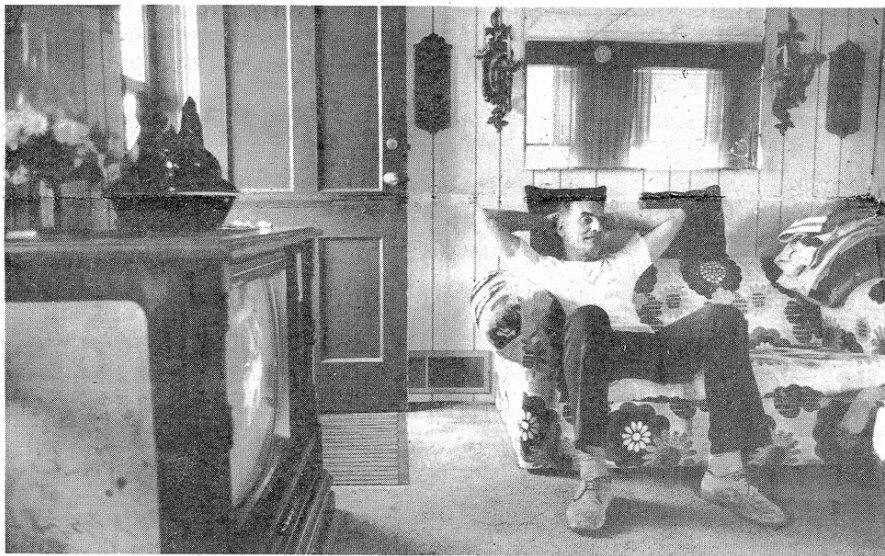
Frank Beck, of Adams Avenue, has his own ideas about improving the reputation of the Heights.

"I was down in the city today. I met a guy who said he used to live in Warminster Heights. I asked him, 'How come you moved?' He said 'That was the filthiest place I ever lived in.'"

"You should've seen his house. It was filthy," Beck said. "That's why the reputation is like it is."

"A lot of people in here don't want to keep their places clean. They throw

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James Lambert relaxes in his home where he's made 22 years worth of improvements.

Palumbo: The Heights could be nicer



John Palumbo, "I need more backing than just myself."

By Regina Pettit, staff reporter

He's been told his plan for Warminster Heights shows he does not know arithmetic. He's been accused of wanting to wipe the low-income housing development off the face of the township.

Amid the gunfire, John Palumbo has stuck to his guns, insisting his only goal is an improved, but smaller project, without kicking anybody out.

What motivates all his fighting, his spontaneous speeches, his steadfast criticism of Heights officials?

"I lived there at one time, around 1952," said the Warminster Township Supervisor and member of the Warminster Heights Corporation Board of Directors.

He followed that little-known fact with an unsolicited comment.

"There's nothing wrong with Warminster Heights," Palumbo said, speaking about the general idea that it exists. "I know it can be much nicer and I think the people need a helping hand."

Except for the federally-funded rehabilitation of the Heights' masonry units, Palumbo takes issue with every aspect of the plan presented by the Bucks County Redevelopment Authority (RDA), of which owns the Heights, and the Warminster Heights Development Corporation (WHDC), which manages it.

The RDA has hired Architect Michael Marcelli, of the Villanova section of Philadelphia, to study the 302 wood-frame units to decide which, if any, can

be rehabilitated.

With that information, it will attempt to get eight governmental bodies to agree to change the urban renewal plan, drawn up when the RDA took over the Heights in 1974. That plan called for demolition of the frame units and replacement with new housing. But RDA officials say there is not enough government funding available to build new.

Palumbo says they blew it on every count.

He advocates demolition of the entire frame section. Because there are 266 families in the frame units and only 79 vacant masonry units, that leaves 187 families homeless. That is why Heights officials have told Palumbo to study his math.

But Palumbo said he knows how to make the numbers work. He said there are about 30 vacancies a month. The frame tenants can be moved to Strategy Area-100 masonry units that will be rehabilitated next year with \$3 million from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development. (HUD) That project will begin with the 70 units now vacant.

"This would take a period of a couple years," Palumbo said. "You can't do it overnight."

A smaller project would be easier to handle and would mean a more sanitary, peaceful community, he said.

"There's no question, and it's spelled out in the (urban renewal) agreement, that the density is too high," Palumbo said, "and that breeds problems within the population."

He said he only wants life better for the tenants.

"They might not realize it. They think I want to get them out of the Heights," Palumbo said. "They read the (newspaper) headlines, and they think I want to level it. (Former Bucks County Commissioner George Metzger) used to say that. Level it. Demolish it. I'm saying demolish some of it but rebuild, too, so it's better."

But Palumbo only wants to rebuild in the masonry section. Any recommendations for the frame section that come from the architect in August will not sit right with him, he said, unless the verdict is that none of the frames are worth rehabilitation.

"They've far exceeded the life of a frame house," Palumbo said. "Another (township) board of supervisors in 10 years is going to look at those frame units (if they are not demolished) and they'll be worse than they are today, because they'll continue to deteriorate."

The frame units deteriorate much faster than the masonry, he said.

In his crusade for "better housing," Palumbo continually has said there are units in the Heights not fit for human habitation, but has named only Prince Street units, scheduled for demolition, this month. Palumbo says "there are many others."

"There are houses that people should not be living in," Palumbo said at a recent supervisors meeting.

But Heights Director Steve Pollack disagreed.

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Warminster Heights: Dreams vs. reality

Palumbo

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"I wish they (tenants) would tell me about it," Pollack said. "We don't have people running in here saying 'I'm living in a unit I shouldn't be living in.'"

"The other question is where are they gonna live? There are no houses to move them into," Pollack said. It is a statement with which RDA and other Heights officials agree. They say Palumbo's attrition plan won't work. "It just doesn't add up," Pollack said.

Palumbo does not believe that, and he does not believe the RDA when it says there are not enough federal and state funds to erect new housing.

"Funds are only available if you go after them," Palumbo said. "They haven't really been going after them. If it took a march on Washington or Harrisburg to get them, that's what we should do."

He recalled a September 1980 meeting between former U.S. Rep. Peter H. Kostmayer and Heights residents and himself when a Kostmayer aide said there were federal

funds available but the competition for them was greater than funds for rehabilitation.

"They (RDA) told me all along there's no money for new homes. Kostmayer said funds were available but they're just more difficult to get," Palumbo said.

"It might be a little more difficult than a year ago, but I wouldn't rule out new housing funds. I need more backing than just myself," he said.

Steven Stein, director of the Bucks County Office of Community Development, said community development funds from HUD can only be used for rehabilitation. New construction is a prohibited use, he said.

Section 8 housing subsidies, the other source of federal funding, can be used for either, Stein said, "but the amount for that housing program is being cut by the Reagan administration."

Stein said it's "pretty fair" to say there is less money available to tear down and build new than to rehabilitate.

"And new construction would be a lot more expensive," he said. "Their cost of renovating under the NSA program is about \$30,000 a unit. They could not build a new building for that cost."

A spokesman for the state Department of Community Affairs said the department targets money for rehabilitation, but money is available for new construction.

Palumbo holds some hope for new housing for which the urban renewal plan calls because to change that plan, the approval of eight governmental bodies is needed.

They are the township supervisors, township planning commission, county commissioners, county planning commission, county redevelopment authority, Heights Development Corp. board of directors, Heights Homeowners Association and the state Department of Community Affairs.

"It'll take an act of God to change that plan," Palumbo said.

The new plan would have to be approved by April 15, 1982.

Some Heights residents are suspicious of Palumbo because of his crusade to have the township inspect Heights units. Heights and RDA officials say the required repairs and the units that would not be re-rented as a result of inspections would bankrupt the project. Currently, inspectors from those two bodies perform inspections to make the units "liveable."

Palumbo fires their suspicious when he advocates demolishing the frame units and selling the land to developers. Residents fear Palumbo is out to get every penny he can from the land sale and the permit fees collected during inspections.

The more they've protested, the more Palumbo has denied their accusations.

He has estimated inspections won't close down more than 50 units, and said the inspections "will keep everybody honest." And while he admits the land sale would mean more tax revenue for the township, he says that is merely a by-product of his efforts to improve the Heights.



Art Gentile/Today's Spirit

Newspaper carriers ride by a dilapidated house.

Reputation

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trash. They don't have control over their places. Management can't do anything if people don't cooperate. They should slap a fine on them," said Beck, who is on disability after having had two heart attacks.

Mark Levin cited recent instances when he and Heights officials took people on tours of the park which ruptured their preconceptions of it.

He said a member of U.S. Rep. James Coyne's staff and long-time resident of Bucks County told him "she was afraid to come out (on the tour). She asked me, 'Am I gonna be safe?' She came out afterwards and said, 'Gee, this is pretty nice,'" Levin said.

"But that reputation has built up," he said. "It's gonna take a long time to kill it."

Tenants like James Lambert of Potter Street defy the Heights' bad reputation.

The last thing he wants, Lambert said as he stepped around his manicured gardens in the front and side yards, is to hear that relatives left after a visit saying, "That place of Jim's is terrible," he said.

Lambert's unit is something of a landmark in the Heights because of extensive improvements he's made since he moved in in 1959. "Some people have

this feeling they're homeowners," Pollack said.

Several other units are like Lambert's, but his is the first on Potter Street after turning into the development.

"You'd be surprised how many people come down and want to see the inside," said Lambert, a retired carpenter who worked part-time at the betting windows of the Keystone Race Track until it closed for the summer.

He doesn't spend his money on alcoholic beverages or frivolous things, he said. "I don't drink. Every time I get a couple of extra bucks, I spend it on the place."

"I'm trying to get things done little by little," Lambert said, striding past newly-paneled kitchen cabinets and a new sink.

In the past several years, Lambert said, "you can find more places neat than dirty. Some people try. You can ride around and tell who cares."

For the first time, the tenants seem to appreciate the good deal they are getting, Lambert said.

"You go outside, you pay a heckuva rent," he said. "I think they're getting a good bargain. I think they're realizing that more and more."

Pollack said most tenants do not have

the money and the skills to accomplish major improvements.

Rose Vaughn, 20, of Downey Drive, lives with her working husband and young son in a masonry unit, and is expecting a second child. Vaughn said she paid to join the cooperative, which will ultimately own the development if enough tenants join. Making improvements to her home takes money, she said, estimating the price of a sheet of paneling to be \$9 and a piece to repair her heater at \$20.

"I don't have that kind of money," Vaughn said.

According to Pollack, another "popular myth" about the community is that it is transient.

"Well over half the people have been living here longer than six years," Pollack said. "So you have a majority of people who we consider long-term residents."

He said the Heights reminds him of a city neighborhood because of close social connections that exist. Many times a couple generations of a family live in the park, he said.

"That's something that doesn't occur frequently in suburban communities," Pollack said. "How many newly married couples can afford to live near their parents?"



Art Gentile/Today's Spirit

Frank Beck, "They don't have control over their places."



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