



*Where you live can change your life.*



## The History of Better Housing Coalition

*by Carter McDowell*

Co-Founder

### ***Founding Vision:***

In 1987, a series of articles had appeared in the Richmond Times Dispatch about deplorable conditions in some of our inner city neighborhoods and the effect this was having on the residents, especially children. Troubling conditions included such things as extreme poverty, crime, truancy, drugs, joblessness, etc.

In a telephone conversation that she initiated, Mary Tyler Cheek and I agreed that we wanted to improve the lives of our fellow citizens in these neighborhoods. We believed that improving housing was one part of the equation that could affect people's lives in a comprehensive way. If **safe, decent, affordable housing** was available, then people could begin to change their lives, and those of their children, for the better. So that became our objective.

We set out to form a coalition of like-minded individuals and organizations. Calling together all groups interested in affordable housing issues, we held meetings, developed broad goals and Richmond Better Housing Coalition (RBHC) was born in the spring of 1988. The United Way donated a one-room office.

### ***Important Early Events:***

Robert Bobb, then city manager, invited the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) to consider starting a program in Richmond to address blight by revitalizing the city's older neighborhoods. LISC is a national intermediary whose president, Paul Grogan, came to Richmond, met with us, and liked our inclusive, community-based, bottom-up approach for revitalizing our deteriorating neighborhoods. Over the next year we raised the \$500,000 required

by LISC for a match to open their office. With a \$250,000 surplus we had raised, we hired T.K. Somanath and opened a new office for RBHC at VHDA in 1990. LISC set up operations in an adjoining office.

### ***Early Challenges (Coalition development)***

Our board was made up of leaders with varied and useful talents but with different interests and approaches to housing solutions.

In addition, we had to refine our relationship with our partner, LISC, and work to build trust with community development corporations (CDCs) who were coalition members.



**Corner of Cary and Meadow Streets**

### ***Early Efforts***

Our first venture (Newtown South) was in a small Southside neighborhood with strong leadership from neighborhood icon, Marion Mashore. We did not build houses, but rather acquired land to support two member CDCs in their construction of 15 homes. In addition, BHC provided real estate development expertise to a CDC to develop two single-room occupancy (SRO) facilities to house the homeless.

Our first development venture was on West Cary Street in the 2000 block with the support of Your Neighbors Civic Association.

### ***Lessons Learned: Obstacles***

- ✚ Resistance from residents: We encounter “NIMBY” (Not In My Backyard) and “The Projects” mentality in perceptions of nearby existing homeowners about the effects of our development.
- ✚ Resistance from governmental bureaucracies and political interests slows all forward movement.
- ✚ Resistance from competitors (CDCs) exists in spite of our conciliatory efforts.
- ✚ There is a persistent difficulty in raising private monies.
- ✚ Confusion and lack of awareness about our brand is a hindrance.

### ***Modifications to the Model:***

- ✦ We made a strategic commitment to do our own development and removed other community development corporations from our Board, planning to relate to them as collaborators in the cause of affordable housing development.
- ✦ Better Housing Coalition joined Richmond Community Development Association (RCDA), a trade association of CDCs staffed by LISC.
- ✦ After experience showed us that support services to residents are essential, we expanded our social work staff. This holistic approach to community building became central to the core of our mission.
- ✦ We responded to the growing need for housing for the seniors with seven senior apartment communities.
- ✦ We added some market rate housing to our mix of options. Emphasis is still on 80% of the median income, but the advantages of mixed income neighborhoods have been demonstrated nationally and locally.
- ✦ We increased our stress on the importance of a regional approach and offering choices, looking for places to build affordable housing close to jobs in the counties.



Winchester Greens – an award-winning model community  
in Chesterfield County

- ✦ We have made efforts (ongoing) to increase awareness of and exposure for BHC. A name change study in 2007 resulted in removal of “Richmond” from our name so as to make our organization more acceptable in the counties and any other site where we choose to operate. The term “Coalition” was not changed. (RBHC became BHC.)

From the first Cary Street development, our organization persevered and grew, expanding to Church Hill, Northside and Blackwell neighborhoods, Chesterfield and Henrico Counties and the City of Petersburg. Twenty-five years after inception the vision still inspires. We have shown that **where you live can change your life**. BHC has developed its own brand by adopting principles of sustainable development. Our track record is serving 3,000 people annually in over 1,000 apartment homes where people's lives **HAVE** improved. We are assisting our greater Richmond community's workforce to remain stable and to expand by offering home ownership opportunities for first-time homebuyers. BHC's \$200 million of investments during the past two decades have helped to improve individual and community assets in more than a dozen neighborhoods in our region.



Co-founder Mary Tyler McClenahan (left)  
President/CEO T.K. Somanath (center)  
Co-founder Carter McDowell (right)

Better Housing Coalition is an organization of committed, skilled professionals who are on the front lines of making our whole community a better place to live.