

One year at Sumlin Park

West Rehoboth coalition to focus on youth center

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In West Rehoboth, it could be said that one person's demolition project is another person's dream home.

Sumlin Park, a group of homes in the small, predominately African-American neighborhood, was a collaboration between the Coalition for West Rehoboth and the Sumlin family, longtime West Rehoboth residents, who owned a large lot on Norwood Street.

The coalition wanted to take homes slated for demolition, upgrade them and turn them into affordable houses for West Rehoboth residents.

The match was made, and the Sumlins allowed the coalition to use one of their lots, while the family kept a second lot.

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- COLEEN COLLINS

Family member Emory Sumlin, who grew up in West Rehoboth, but now lives in Florida, said the family was happy to help the neighborhood in whatever way they could.

"For us, it was a no-brainer," he said.

Initiated by then-coalition President Kevin McKinney, the park contains three houses. The plan was scaled back from four because of a lack of space and money, coalition member Jim Blakeslee said. A green house was donated and moved in October 2012 from Country Club Drive outside Rehoboth Beach.

Next came the former Jane and Georgie building, moved from Rehoboth Avenue in January 2013. Last was a brown house, moved from North Shores in November 2013.



water and sewer improvements at a cost

COALITION FOR WEST REHOBOTH members (l-r) Letitia Sturgis, Jim Blakeslee and Coleen Collins stand at Sumlin Park. The coalition moved and converted into affordable housing for West Rehoboth residents.

Blakeslee said each house was retrofitted, including new heating systems, and of \$30,000 to \$50,000 each.

Coalition Secretary Coleen Collins said tenants pay rent far below what they would get on the market, and all of them are from West Rehoboth.

"They've been great tenants," she said. "It's been working out well."

For coalition President Letitia Sturgis, Sumlin Park is a personal endeavor. Her daughter, Tina Knight, lives in the green house, and Sturgis has been staying there while her own home is being renovated. She said her daughter had been living in a trailer with kerosene heat.

"It's nice to come home to a nice, warm house," Sturgis said. "Being able to walk into a house that is comfortable and safe, that has its own washer and dryer. It's lovely."

Knight grew up in West Rehoboth, departed, and has now returned, living with her daughter, grandson and brother.

"It's wonderful," she said. "This is what I wanted. I'm glad to be back home."

A West Rehoboth resident, Sturgis said she was grateful this project has allowed three families to have their own places.

"Whenever you can give something

do something for somebody," Sturgis said.

With the housing project now complete, the coalition is now setting its sights on renovations to the West Side New Beginnings community center and supporting education for the neighborhood's children.

"We've succeeded in this goal, providing some affordable housing to the community," Collins said. "We're going to focus on the community itself at large."

That's something Sumlin said he would like to see. He said state- and county-level officials should get more involved in helping West Rehoboth.

"More needs to be done," he said.

Still, for the coalition, Sumlin Park is a good first step.

"It's a great feeling to see the project come to fruition. To see what it was then and to see what it is now, and to know that three families are safe and secure," Collins said.

"It was a very complicated