

As Sandy Springs rents rise, a working-class ‘exodus’ begins

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Ayanna Souffrant moved to Sandy Springs 10 years ago for reasons many people do: to live in a safe community with good jobs and schools. Employed at the Perimeter Mall Chick-fil-A to support her two children, she’s one of the service workers who keep Perimeter Center in business.

She’s also one of the many lower-income residents being priced out by skyrocketing rents and a lack of affordable housing programs.



Michelle Alexander, the city’s community development director, discusses housing challenges with residents during the April 4 meeting at the Community Assistance Center. (John Ruch)

“I’m on my way out of Sandy Springs,” Souffrant says. “I’m going back to Rockdale County.”

She was speaking at an April 4 meeting where city officials sought lower-income residents’ input on housing accessibility as part of a process for renewing a federal Community Development Block Grant the city receives. Only five residents attended, but all had stories of struggling with rising rents. And, at least for now, city officials had no answers for them.

CDBG funds can be used to directly support affordable housing, but the city chooses to spend it solely on building Roswell Road sidewalks.

The city is working on a program to establish “workforce,” or middle-income, units in new developments, but it has no such plan for low-income housing. In fact, the city’s [main workforce housing strategy](#) involves tearing down apartment complexes like the one where Souffrant lives, and replacing them with more expensive, and largely ownership, housing.

The April 4 meeting was held at the Sandy Springs headquarters of the Community Assistance Center, a nonprofit aimed at preventing hunger and homelessness. Tamara Carrera, the CAC’s chief executive officer, said the city

needs a program of mixed-income housing or it will face an “exodus” of thousands of lower-income, blue-collar residents.

“It should be mixed housing,” Carrera said at the meeting. “And the city can do it.”

In a later interview, she said more than 13,000 Sandy Springs residents have incomes below the federal poverty rate, and more who are above that rate are still low-income.

“That’s an awful lot of families who would have to move because they have no place to go,” Carrera said. “It’s going to be an exodus.”

That exodus is already gearing up, residents said at the meeting. They complained of the lack of affordable options and the county’s 10-year wait list for federal subsidized housing vouchers. All of the residents were long-term residents — seven to 19 years — and most said they are working mothers.

One resident said she just got a job in Sandy Springs and likes living near work. But she worries about her apartment complex being redeveloped into something unaffordable. “I don’t want to be pushed out,” she said.

Ronnesha Wade, a 10-year resident living at the Ecco Apartments, is a food service worker at Emory who likes living here so her kids have a good school system. She said her one-bedroom unit’s rent has risen from \$439 a month to over \$800. “I pray to God my income increases,” she said.

Souffrant said she’s being forced to move by rent that’s at \$924 a month and climbing. She said she’ll look for work in Rockdale County, but meanwhile will make the commute to the Chick-fil-A to hold onto her job.

The meeting was led by Michelle Alexander, the city’s community development director, who is hosting various such meetings at nonprofits and apartment complexes.

Such input, known as a “Fair Housing Assessment,” is required for CDBG funding, but Alexander pushed the City Council to do a larger process than mandated. As she told the residents, while the meeting was basically about sidewalk money, it was also “an opportunity to have conversations that can be kind of hard” about the city’s affordability challenges and growing diversity.

But the most basic input from residents was that they want lower-income-affordable housing, and the most basic answer is that the city has no such program or plan — a tension underlying the process.

At the Feb. 21 City Council meeting where Alexander got an informal thumbs-up for the additional CDBG outreach, Mayor Rusty Paul said that citizens frequently ask him about “apartments disappearing ... [and] are we trying to push out poor people. And that is not the case.” He said that caring for the “least, lost and left behind” is “part of our moral and ethical code as a community.”

The mayor said he hoped more proactive outreach would assure residents of the city’s good intentions, but he and other officials made no mention of actual new programs. Paul has previously said the city is essentially powerless to do anything about low-income affordability and that he expects such residents will inevitably be priced out.

Carrera has a different viewpoint. “It is not a hopeless cause,” she said.

Carrera believes the city could use incentives or regulations to create housing with a mix of units affordable to all income ranges, and with some handicapped-accessible units, as it is currently planning to do so for middle-income units. And while the sidewalks built with CDBG money are indeed a benefit to local low-income communities, she said, she’d also like the city to direct some of those funds to “human services” like hers.

“I think, honestly, the politicians are stuck between a rock and a hard place,” she said, describing practical and political obstacles to low-income affordability.

Most currently affordable apartments are that way because they're old and some are hazardous and need redevelopment, Carrera said. The federal government isn't offering subsidies for mixed-income housing and no one here wants segregated, low-income-only housing, she said.

And, she added, elected officials have a voting base that only wants "housing for people who are easier to live with, put it that way."

As with many metro Atlanta issues, another problem is the lack of a regional affordable housing strategy, said Carrera. Instead, the city of Atlanta has displaced residents into the suburbs, which displaces them even farther out, and so on.

She said political will must eventually come from "a moral question — how far do you push people [out] and for how long? ... The next city, next city, next city. When do they stop pushing?"

