

Housing crisis sparks fears of an end for Illinois town

Sara Burnett, Associated Press, May 5, 2017

A government plan to tear down a crumbling public housing complex in the southern Illinois town of Cairo has sent roughly 200 families searching for new homes and sparked fears that the once-thriving river city could be coming to an end.

Sitting at the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers, Cairo was once a shipping hub, home to 15,000 people at its peak in the 1940s. But racial strife, flooding and economic troubles have left the town with just 2,600 residents, a vacant downtown, boarded up and abandoned buildings, and little habitable housing.

If the residents of the buildings slated for demolition are not able to find new homes in Cairo and end up leaving for other communities, the city's population would be cut by 15 percent and the school district would lose nearly 40 percent of its student body.

"It'll be a ghost town," said Paul Lambert, a 66-year-old retired security guard who was born and raised in Cairo, left for a while, but returned in 1974.

After 39 years in the same housing authority apartment, Lambert is now among the residents being relocated due to what the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development has called "deplorable living conditions." If forced to leave, Lambert says he'll take his wife and 22-year-old son to join family in Tennessee. But, he says, "I'm not ready to do anything right now."

Built in 1942, the Elmwood and McBride apartments are now infested with rodents and bugs and have heating and plumbing that don't work properly, HUD says. Some residents say they're afraid to let their children play outside because of crime in the area. The federal agency took over the property and other local housing authority operations in February 2016, amid allegations that the former head of the Alexander County Housing Authority had used federal funds for meals, trips and benefits while the buildings deteriorated.

HUD announced last month it would close the buildings and relocate the residents, saying the cost to repair the complexes — estimated at more than \$41 million — is too much. Residents will get a voucher to use toward housing and help finding a new place to live, with the first relocations starting this month.

But few properties are available in Cairo — pronounced KEHR'-oh — or in the rural areas surrounding it. HUD and the city are working with area landlords to try to get properties to meet agency standards, but the process is slow. Developers are unlikely to team up with HUD — the typical practice for affordable housing projects today — on new housing in an area where more than half of children live in poverty.

"For most private developers it's a long-term investment," said HUD spokesman Jereon Brown. "Right now that would be tough to do here."

The town — visited by the Lewis and Clark Expedition that explored what is now the western U.S. in the early 1800s and referenced in Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" written later that century — started seeing people leave in large numbers after race riots in the 1960s. As major employers closed over the following decades, things got worse. Flooding has also been a problem for the city, which is surrounded by levees.

But Andrea Evers, the local school superintendent who came to Cairo in 2012, says she thought things were looking up. The city was taking steps to bring business to its port and it sounded like a grocery store might open. Now she has classrooms full of students worried their lives will be uprooted.

Students have written letters to new HUD Secretary Ben Carson, asking him to visit or help save their homes. Carson wrote back, telling Evers and the students that there were few options for the "nearly bankrupt" local housing authority and that the decision came only after much "hand-wringing."

Evers says there's no question people in the housing complex should have far better living conditions.

"I'm just hopeful there can be some solution that will allow people to stay," Evers said. "Otherwise the unintended byproduct is a community will never be the same."

Associated Press researcher Jennifer Farrar contributed to this report.

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