Liberty Square housing project to be razed, redeveloped

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Liberty Square, Miami’s oldest and most notorious public housing project, may be coming down.

Plans are under way to raze the rows and rows of drab one- and two-story buildings from the New Deal era and rebuild the crime-plagued community in the core of Liberty City. The administration of Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez is cobbling together $74 million in public funds and pushing to break ground next year on what is expected to be a potentially $200 million public-private partnership.
The mayor’s plan represents a sweeping change for tenants who often say they live in substandard conditions and in fear of gangsters and dope dealers who have terrorized their neighborhood with gunfire. A series of half-measures have failed for years, and now Gimenez wants to wipe the slate clean and start fresh.

“The revitalization of Liberty Square is a $74 million commitment to transform this public housing project and create jobs in Liberty City,” Gimenez spokesman Michael Hernandez said Thursday. “The work is also necessary to address high rates of poverty and crime in the area.”

Built in 1936 under the auspices of providing better living conditions for African Americans living in unsanitary Overtown shacks, Liberty Square opened as a step up for many of its first tenants, who remembered a quiet, pleasant community. But conditions began to deteriorate in the ’60s and ’70s, and the project off Northwest 62nd Street erupted in violence during the 1980 McDuffie riots.

In 1987, gas leaks were found in dozens of apartments following a fatal explosion. And before the end of the decade, a scathing grand jury report cited Liberty Square — now called Pork ’n Beans — among the squalid public housing projects run at the time by Miami-Dade’s housing arm.

Today, Liberty Square tenants talk about rat infestations and moldy walls. Their neighborhood is known for the gangland killings that erupt along its perimeter, including a mass shooting last year across the street that wounded seven people and killed two. In the first six months of last year, 43 people were shot in and around the community.

It has grown from a symbol of progress for Miami’s black community to a constant reminder of the city’s persistent poverty and crime.

“Right now our children, it’s where they can’t even come outside to play. We have crime 24 hours around the clock sometimes and it gets hard. It gets hard for them even to have a regular childhood,” said Sara Alvin Smith, head of the Liberty City tenants association. “Sometimes you have to demolish something to make it better.”

For now, only a framework exists for the county project, which would move forward in phases if approved by county commissioners and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Michael Liu, Miami-Dade director of public housing and community development, told the Miami Herald and WLRN News (http://wlrn.org/post/liberty-square-housing-project-be-redeveloped-2020) Thursday that the county’s plan is to launch the project by building a new housing complex about two miles to the southwest of Liberty Square on the vacant lot where the Lincoln Gardens project once stood. Once that building is completed, dozens of families in the buildings between 12th
and 13th avenues would be moved out of Liberty Square and into the new complex.

Their old homes would be demolished and a new project would be built and opened to Liberty Square residents previously living in the middle of the complex. The county would then raze those newly vacated buildings and repeat the process until the whole site is redeveloped.

The county expects to invest $48 million in funds to build what Liu is for now calling “New Liberty Square.” Another $26 million would go toward job development, new single-family homes and a series of other initiatives around other parts of Liberty City in order to revitalize the struggling community. Noting that the project will be competitively bid, Liu said the idea is to leverage public funds to encourage private investment that would fund the bulk of the work.

Most importantly, Liu said, the residents of Liberty Square’s 675 occupied apartments won’t be displaced.

“All residents in good standing will have a unit to return to,” Liu pledged.

That’s a big promise to a very skeptical community. Residents were quick Thursday to bring up the county’s troubled redevelopment of the James E. Scott housing complex.

In 2000, Miami-Dade County razed the complex’s 411 homes, displacing more than 1,150 people with promises that new homes would be built and they’d be the first to be offered an ownership opportunity. The county pledged to replace the housing project at Northwest 22nd Avenue and 75th Street with new homes and apartments, and parks and courtyards.

When the residents were forced from their homes they received federal Section 8 vouchers to help them into subsidized homes elsewhere. Those who wanted to return to new homes were given a number and placed on a list with promises of first dibs.

But complicated legal and public-relations issues and a scandal in the county’s housing authority office left former residents stuck mostly in projects and low-income homes in South Dade. For a decade they were stuck in limbo.

Then, even before they could move into any of the new 247 apartments and 107 homes that were finally completed in 2012, built with federally-funded Hope VI money, residents who wanted to come back had to prove they spent the past decade paying rent on time, never being evicted, and that they had not established a criminal record.

Even today, 14 years after the Scott housing project was destroyed, hundreds of its former residents...
never made it back.

“I’m concerned for the people,” said Miami Mayor Tomás Regalado.

Audrey Edmonson, the county commissioner whose district runs through Liberty Square, said the county has learned from the Scott housing fiasco, and will avoid many of the same mistakes by building in phases. For example, residents will be promised first shot at home ownership, though any new construction will be mixed income.

“We're going to build first before we demolish anything,” Edmonson said. “That's the only way I approved this whole thing.”

Liu said he's very aware that Liberty Square residents have been the victims of repeated broken promises.

“We understand that. We're sensitive to it,” he said. “We're going to make sure that doesn't happen here.”

Funding for the project, and a competitive process to select a developer, must be approved by the county commission. The first of multiple votes could take place as soon as March. The entire project is expected to take four or five years.

Still, residents are cautious.

“We want our people placed accordingly. We don’t want them displaced. We don’t want them not to be able to come back,” said Smith.

But not everyone wants to return.

Standing on her stoop, Waltermae Martin said she's had enough of Liberty Square, where she said she's lived since 1973.

The longtime resident said she attended a meeting Tuesday at the Liberty Square Community Center where Liu explained the county's plans. But she said she doesn't want to return to her tiny home, which is cooled by a window-unit air conditioner and has a bathtub “you wouldn't bathe your dog in.”

She said cameras the county installed over her block to monitor illegal activity don't do anything to stop drug deals. She doesn't think it matters what's built.

“This is a racket place, just gone to the dogs. This place ain’t no good to be living in,” she said. “I don’t
care what this deal is. I want out.”