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Roanoke's Redevelopment Faces Tough Sledding

North East Section Is Target Area
Opposition To Plan May Block Clearance Of 83-Acre Section



Many Seem Confused On The Issues
Starting Over Is Main Complaint Of Elderly Residents

Citation: "Roanoke Redevelopment Faces Tough Sledding," Norfolk Journal and Guide (National edition), April 2, 1955.



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By FRANCIS H. MITCHELL

ROANOKE, Va. — If you ask two people about redevelopment in Roanoke you will probably get differing answers ranging from the apathetic "it doesn't make any difference to me" to a passionate "we don't want any part of it."

From other people you may hear sentiments ranging from "it's a good thing and I hope it goes through" to "it's socialism at its worst, telling people where to live."

BUT THE upshot of all the argument is that Roanoke is divided on the merits of a proposed redevelopment program which, if passed, is slated to tie in the viaduct construction with clearance of an area of the North East side of the city inhabited by Negroes.

As a matter of fact, Roanoke in the past was set against slum clearance to the extent that a proposed 300-unit housing development for Negroes was shelved and is still being held in abeyance until City Council asks for its construction. And the program about which the current hue and cry is being raised is not slum clearance.

CHIEF opposition to the plan stems from property owners who live in the 83.5 acres in what was part of the original city of Roanoke. Of this area something over 35 acres will be re-used as residential sites, some multi-family, but all privately owned property to be built and maintained in conformity with the city's housing code.

Organized to combat the program is the Commonwealth Citizens Association, headed by Ira Womac, with Mrs. C. S. Williams, of 221 Harrison avenue, N. E., as a most vocal spokesman.

A SOFT-SPOKEN, but intense woman, Mrs. Williams, who lost two sons in service, lives in a home similar to some in the area which cannot be classed as slum dwellings. But the fact is that slum clearance is a tag that has been placed on the proposed project by accident since it is not slum clearance as Norfolkins or residents of Newport News know it.

"This is not a slum area," Mrs. Williams will insist, "and the only reason it is classified as such is so that the property can be bought for a low price

and be developed by private enterprise."

"MOST OF THE people in this area are old, retired pensioners, and widows, who will not be able to re-establish themselves with the little money they get for their property."

And to the 540-odd families, approximately half of whom are home owners, this seems to be the crux of the opposition to redevelopment.

Almost to a man, those interviewed will immediately tell a reporter "we are too old to be going into debt again to buy or build homes."

DR. L. E. PAXTON, a dentist, who owns property in the area but does not live there, echoes some of the sentiments of Mrs. Williams. "In the long run," he says, "the Negro will be the loser. If the property is taken by right of eminent domain they (the housing redevelopment and housing authority) don't plan to give the people more than \$3,000 or \$4,000. The average person in the area is 55 years old, or above. If he gets \$4,000 for his property and has to pay that plus \$2,000 or \$3,000 to make another place liveable, it's more debt than a person that age can stand."

The Rev. W. M. Gilbert, who owns the second house in bottom insert top photo, says "I heard they are going to tear the area down and rebuild it and we (the property owners) will have to pay the authority's price for the houses and land. He will be 80 years old on May 15th and pastors the Sweet Union Baptist Church, with a congregation he estimates between 500 and 600 members.

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According to the map above the pastor's house would be moved to another location.

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R. P. SMITH, 54, leading horse from barn in top photo, is a produce merchant who lost an arm through blood poisoning during but not in the first World War. "I'm against it," he says without reservation, "but I don't know what they're going to do." He lives at 237 Walker avenue.

A World War I veteran, 65-year-old Alfred Brown of 240 Rutherford avenue, is against the redevelopment program, but hasn't tried to find out what it is all about, he says.

* * *

HE IS NOT typical of the area's people, although quite a few who were contacted were laboring under misinformation about the means and ends of the redevelopment plan.

Some have it confused with public housing to the extent that they are worried about how they will qualify from a standpoint of earnings to live in public housing projects. Others feel that all the homes in the section are to be demolished. Many think that only a limited number of former residents will again be able to locate in the area. All seem to feel that whatever the plan it will cost them hard-earned money and force them to go into debt.

* * *

THIS IS THE case despite hearings on the plan, and attempts to answer questions raised by property owners and residents. In January four hearings were planned to give city councilmen and city officials an opportunity to ask questions about the program and to give the public an opportunity to be heard either at groups or individuals.

In these sessions the opposition, which included the Roanoke Real Estate Board, the Chamber of Commerce, the citizens who later formed the Commonwealth Citizens Association, had their say, which included from Mrs. Williams, a "do-it-yourself" type of reclamation in which the property owners would bring their holdings up to standard without interference from the housing authority.

* * *

RICHARD L. BECK, a five-year man at the task of executive director of the Roanoke Redevelopment and Housing Authority, has a different view of the plan. "It will," he says, "provide a new play area for the Gilmer Avenue school, new park areas, two major access streets to the north end from downtown, a North end shopping center, a civic auditorium, some businesses, and other improvements which recommend it for approval."

As Mr. Beck explains it, the new program is this:

* * *

OF THE 80-PLUS acres to be involved, 36.3 are now in residential use, 4.2 for businesses, 1.7 for schools, 10.3 are vacant, and 32.2 are used for streets and alleys.

Under the redevelopment plan, 23.8 acres will be used for general residential area with two-family or single family residences; 12.8 acres will be given over to multi-family housing; 11.5 acres will be dedicated to public use; six acres will be commercial and 29.4 acres will be used for streets. All this will be done at a cost of about \$3,016,908, with the city's share a little over a million dollars.

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OF THIS SUM to be paid by the city, part credit will be given for Addison high school, recently constructed; 100 per cent credit will be given for a

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new \$400,000 school to replace the old Gainsboro school, and the balance will be absorbed in streets, water, and dedication of land for public use.

Disputing the contention that the program will drive people out of the area, Mr. Beck points out that there will be 25 more housing units in the North East section than there are at present. Families, he said, will be temporarily housed until their own homes can be built, or until multi-family housing is available for them in the area.

• • •
FIRST OPPORTUNITY to refuse lots will be theirs, he said, and the program will permit the demolition of substandard dwellings and, the renovation of other units.

Typical of the substandard situation are 69 homes with no baths, five with no inside or outside toilets, 64 with privies, two with no water of any sort, 10 with water in the yard only, seven with no electricity and 248 substandard or dilapidated homes.

THERE ARE, Mr. Beck indicated, 190 standard dwellings with approximately 85 badly deteriorated which will be returned to standard. Of the standard homes or those to be returned to standard, 26 will remain in their present locations, and 75 will be moved and re-grouped.

With public opinion not clearly for or against the program, Mr. Beck will not predict the outcome of the council's study of the plan. From all appearances it will be touch and go, with either side standing a strong chance of winning out in the end.

• • •
AND IN ADDITION, whatever the outcome, residents of North East may continue to harbor the feeling that they were deserted by Negroes who live in North West, since there has been little help in that quarter for opposing the plan.

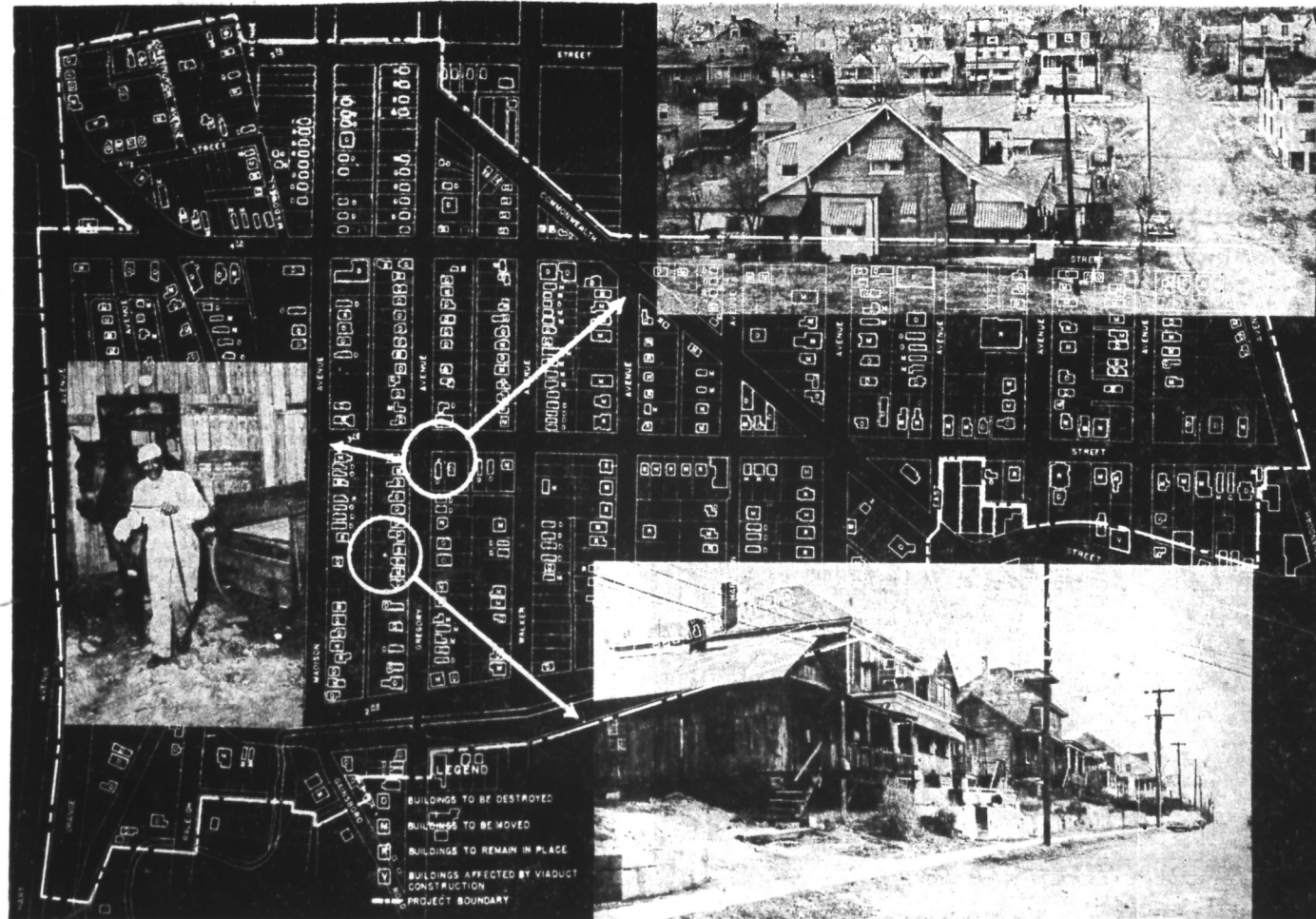
Questioned on the subject, North Westerners almost unanimously say that "it is progress," while admitting that there will be some hardship worked on residents of the area who will have to adjust to new homes at an advanced age, and may have to go into debt to finance construction or to re-purchase homes which will be renovated.

But through it all one thing stands out. Too few people in Roanoke who may be affected by redevelopment of the North East tract of the city, know much about the program, and too few others seems to care about a proposal that will affect the lives of a fairly large segment of the Negro population.

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WHAT WILL HAPPEN—The legend, bottom center of a map of the area, shows what will happen to many of the homes in the section being considered for redevelopment. Superimposed over the map, at top, is a view looking toward Madison avenue up Third street. At left is produce mer-

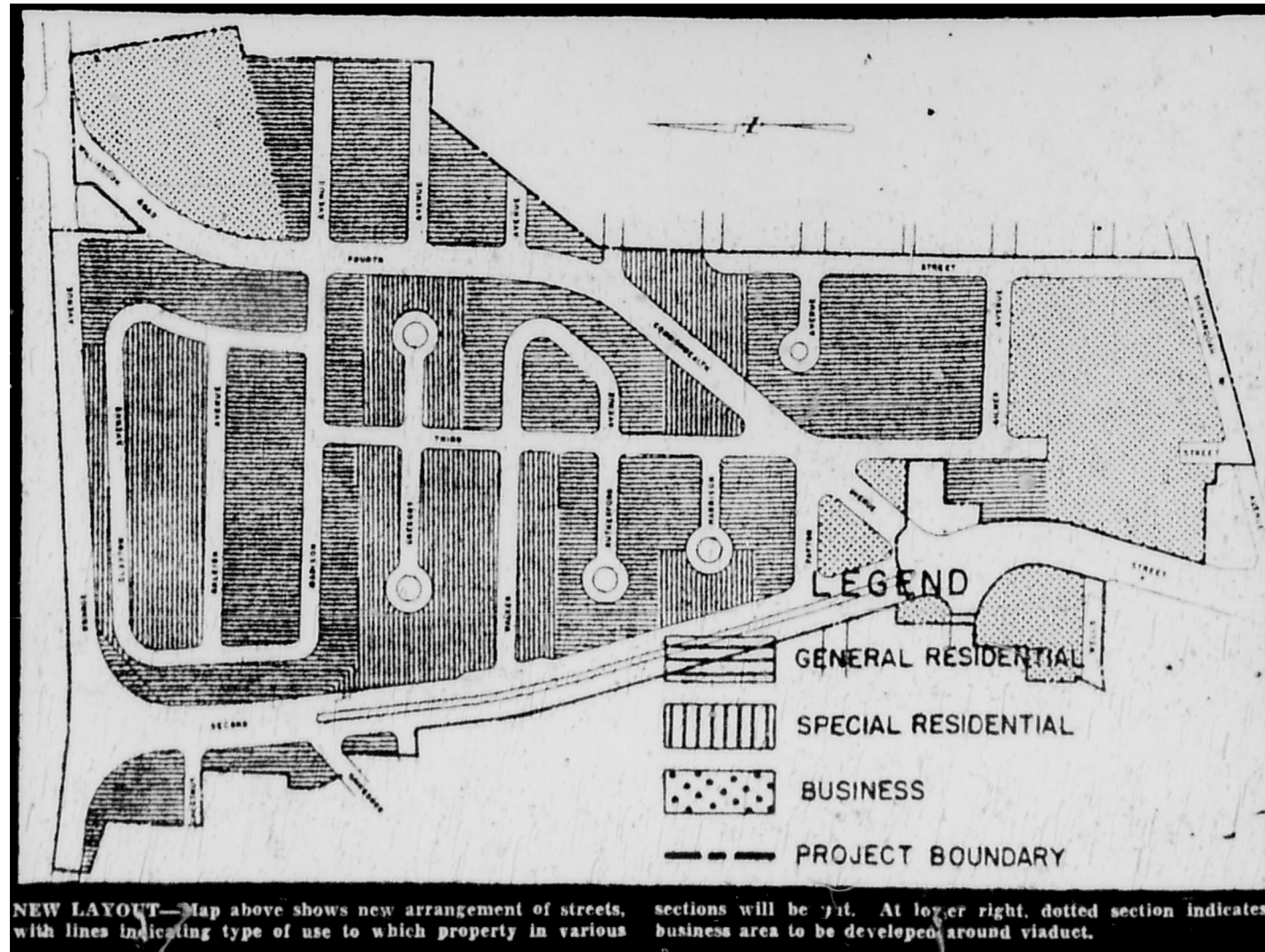
chant R. P. Smith, who admits that he knows little about the plan, and bottom photo shows second from left, home of the Rev. W. M. Gilbert, 222 Gregory avenue, which will be moved if the plan is approved. Negro member of the five-man housing authority is Attor-

ney Jacob Reid, who was appointed in 1949. Others are C. Fred Mangus, chairman; Robert Meybin, Marceau Thierry and Malcolm Worrell. Terms run for four years and are staggered so that one man leaves the group yearly.

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