

## As Memphis' last public housing project closes, neighborhood schools and families scramble



In the shadow of historic Booker T. Washington High School, Foote Homes has been the home of thousands of students to attend downtown Memphis schools since the 1940s. But that's about to change.

The 46-acre development is the city's last remaining housing project and is due to close in September to make room for mixed-income housing, forcing the relocation of about 330 students.

But the impact on three downtown schools, including what was formerly the city's first black public high school under segregation, remains uncertain as Shelby County Schools begins its new school year next week. And the back-to-school timing of the transition, combined with confusion about the city's relocation process and the lack of a school impact study, are certain to add more enrollment challenges in a district that historically has struggled to get students registered and starting school on time.

Only weeks before her son was hoping to start his junior year at Booker T. Washington, Foote Homes resident Vanessa Nelson was still trying to figure out how to get a housing voucher to relocate. Asked where her son Elliott would be attending school next year, Nelson was blunt.

"I don't know," she said, while walking to a recent neighborhood housing fair.

Foote Homes residents still were receiving their housing vouchers in late July, just as Shelby County Schools made its last big push to register for school. Families are supposed to be out by September, a month after the school year starts.

Booker T. Washington stands to bear the brunt of the relocation impact along with two elementary schools, Downtown and La Rose.

The 600-student high school, which had an enrollment of 561 last school year, has aggressively tried to address confusion over relocation by calling parents, hosting registration block parties and remaining open for registration throughout summer break.

“Even if they have to move and transfer, at least they haven’t missed a lot of school,” principal Alishia Kiner said this week. “We’ve been real pushy in that regard because we don’t want to lose kids.”

The efforts appear to be working. Four days before school is to begin, registration numbers are actually up over the same time last year. Even so, Kiner and her team are bracing to lose many students after September’s relocation deadline. And she’s talking frequently with other administrators at other schools where the kids might end up.

“If we’re going to meet kids, and we know they have issues when they have to move, then we just have to know how to support them. So part of that is not being selfish,” said Kiner, adding that dealing with student mobility is a regular challenge for Memphis schools.

### **Shifting priorities**

The razing of Foote Homes is part of the city’s decade-long effort to redevelop its South Main Historic District, which lies about a mile away in downtown Memphis. South Main includes a mosaic of shops, restaurants and art galleries anchored by the former Lorraine Motel, where civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968. It’s now the home of the National Civil Rights Museum.

Foote Homes stands in stark contrast to the tourist-laden district area. Built in the 1940s, the 420-unit development features rows of deteriorating brick apartments lining both sides of Danny Thomas Boulevard. Over the years, they’ve housed famous Memphians including civil rights activist Benjamin Hooks and Stax musician Rufus Thomas. Last renovated in the 1990s, the buildings have fallen into disrepair.

But [the Foote Homes redevelopment plan](#) — which includes the construction of 460 mixed-housing units and amenities such as green spaces and a fitness trail — has been beset by challenges. Earlier work to raze and redevelop several other housing projects had sapped most of the city’s federal grant money by the time leaders got to Foote Homes, forcing the city to seek additional funding for the \$60 million-plus project and contributing to the local community’s uncertainty about its future.

Then, this spring, residents got the 90-day notice to leave the public housing project, but most residents opted to wait until they had a voucher in hand to start looking for a new place to live. It wasn’t until late July that the last of them had received a voucher.

“We’re not saying they have to be out by any specific date, but we’d like them to be out by September,” said Dorian Jenkins, interim director of the Memphis Housing Authority, adding that demolition will start “as soon as all the families are out.”

Throughout the summer, Foote Homes has been a neighborhood in transition. On a recent sweltering summer day, workers from the housing authority could be seen inspecting empty units and clearing out others, while children played outside and many apartments were clearly still occupied.

Across the street, Streets Ministries has continued to maintain services for Foote Homes kids at its downtown site.

“I think it’s all been pretty muddy,” director Latoya McCutcheon said of the relocation.

“And I don’t want to say that they didn’t do a good job of preparing the families. I just think there was a disconnect between what will actually happen and what you should do to prepare for that transition. Something wasn’t communicated to the point where the residents actually understood that they would have to be out by September. Because of that, a lot of the families are just kind of left in chaos,” she said.

## **Dropping the ball**

The Foote Homes relocation coincided with a change in leadership at the Housing Authority as former director Robert Lipscomb stepped down in late August 2015. Lipscomb had spearheaded the city’s efforts to tear down and redevelop its public housing and had been lauded by school leaders for his organization and communication in previous relocations.

“To his credit, Robert Lipscomb was focused on some of the legacy schools (such as Booker T.),” said Superintendent Dorsey Hopson of Shelby County Schools in a June interview on the podcast Funky Politics. “But obviously when he resigned, I don’t think anybody has picked up the ball on that.”

Hopson said Shelby County Schools was largely left out of the Foote Homes planning as the project began to gain traction and deadlines. “There was no comprehensive plan (for school relocation),” he said.

Chris Caldwell, whose school board district encompasses Foote Homes and Booker T., expressed surprise that the relocation was moving forward. “It hasn’t come before the board, so I would hope there would be in communication with the district,” he said.

By default, the district has taken on a more reactive role with Foote Homes residents, waiting until they’ve found their new homes before helping them register their students for school. “Once they’ve identified where they want to live, it’s our job to help to make sure that they’re ready for Aug. 8,” said spokeswoman Natalia Powers, adding that residents can relocate within a 50-mile radius.

That could further drain the district of students. Shelby County Schools already has thousands of empty seats due to decades of declining enrollment.

Foote Homes resident Tiara Edmond, a mother of two children, said her family was open to a move and a change of schools from KIPP Memphis Collegiate charter schools under the state-run Achievement School District. But by the end of July when she hadn’t received her housing voucher, she decided to send her kids back to KIPP. Edmond has a car and said she could drive her kids to their current school, no matter where her family ends up living.

Other schools in the Foote Homes community already have been impacted.

MASS Academy, a K-3 charter school that was based out of the Pentecostal Temple Church of God on Danny Thomas Boulevard, closed in June after only one year of operation due to declining enrollment — and the expectation of even fewer students next year. School leaders opted to surrender their charter in hopes of reopening another school in the future to serve low-income families. But their hearts are still in downtown neighborhoods including historic Foote Homes.

“The kids were awesome — I loved every moment of it,” said principal Lorene Essex, adding that the 60-student school and small classes provided a family-like environment.

“The families were wonderful and loving to work with. I’m going to miss them very much.”

*Published on Chalkbeat.org on August 4, 2016*