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By Chris Horne

Demand strong for College Hill housing

Things are looking good in the College Hill area, a set of historic neighborhoods around the Mercer University campus in Macon. In fact, the news is so good, College Hill Alliance officials are taking on new responsibilities to accommodate the demand for housing in that increasingly trendy area.

College Hill Alliance Director Pat Madison knows it's a perfect problem to have. His organization is a public-private partnership funded by a \$5 million grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation to revitalize the largely residential area that stretches from Mercer to downtown Macon.

"We've been very successful in selling the lifestyle," he said of his staff's focus on creating events geared to attract college students and young professionals: Second Sunday Brunch, the soapbox derby and movies in the park.

"There's a waiting list now of people who want to live in College Hill," he said.

Historic Macon Director Josh Rogers confirmed he has a waiting list of "maybe 10 people" who want to buy a College Hill home from Historic Macon, which rehabilitates and then sells historic houses. But, Rogers says, there aren't enough houses ready to sell.

With interest in College Hill steadily growing, Madison has turned his attention to Beall's Hill, an adjacent neighborhood with a significant number of rundown houses and empty lots in need of development.

Before now, the master plan for College Hill did not include the adjacent Beall's Hill area, in part because the Beall's Hill Development Corp. was in charge.

Formed by Mercer and the city of Macon, the corporation fell apart after concerns about bad bookkeeping emerged in 2006.

However, the corporation was successful in replacing Oglethorpe Homes with the newer, mixed-income Tattnell Place Apartments, which anchors Beall's Hill, thanks to the coveted Hope VI grant secured by the Macon Housing Authority.

To "complete the job that was started" in Beall's Hill, Madison said his staff will take on responsibilities for a new organization, Historic Hills and Heights, which brings together Macon, Mercer, the housing authority, Historic Macon and the Knight Foundation. In time, the other partners will take over as the alliance fades into the background.

Within the next 45 days, Madison said, Hills and Heights will break ground on the first phase in Beall's Hill: four new "infill" houses, which are designed to match the historic quality of the neighborhood; and one historic rehabilitation.

Using almost \$1 million from the Hills and Heights partners, Madison said the plan is to put 15 houses a year

on the market, then sell the houses to pay for the next phase of construction.

After a couple of years, Madison, a developer by trade, thinks momentum will take over and the private sector will begin doing the bulk of the rehabilitation and in-fill construction.

Beverly Blake, program director for the Knight Foundation, said success in Beall's Hill is only the start. Once the effort is complete there, Hills and Heights will move on to another historic neighborhood.

"This is a demonstration project for the whole city," she said, adding that the Knight Foundation got involved with Beall's Hill in 2002 and also pays for rehabilitation for existing homeowners through the Community Foundation of Central Georgia and Rebuilding Macon.

The city has pledged to give \$75,000 a year, which is the same amount as Mercer and the Macon Housing Authority have committed. But unlike those two, the city will recover its investment by the second year, Madison said, with new property taxes.

That doesn't take into consideration other positive side effects, such as a reduction in the crime rate.

Rogers, the former head of an earlier incarnation of the College Hill group, said in two neighborhoods where Historic Macon has already completed significant revitalization efforts, crime has dropped considerably since the late 1990s — by 80 percent in Huguenin Heights and 58 percent in Tattnell Heights.

“It’s a big piece of making the whole city safer,” he said.

Point-blank, the area — and Macon by extension — is at its tipping point, Blake said.

“It’s the lesson all cities learn. Unless you have strong neighborhoods and get people involved, your city doesn’t grow,” she said. “And if a city doesn’t grow, it dies.”