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# Officials pledge, again, to clean up Coatesville housing project

**OAK STREET** from CC1  
Chester County officials were bickering over what to do with a \$13 million surplus. Many residents of Oak Street say they can barely come up with enough money for new clothing.

Oddly, the property is more suited to mansions than the dreary, concrete, warehouse-looking structures of Oak Street. The complex, built in 1971, is on a steep hill overlooking the rest of Coatesville, which — with the giant Lukens steel plant long closed — has problems of its own.

Drugs and crime and poverty are everywhere, of course. But compared with sprawling big-city ghettos plagued by deep-rooted problems, one might think a suburban housing project with a small population (531) and distinct boundaries (about the size of one city block) would be easier for officials to get their arms around.

Some argue the problems of Oak Street are self-induced. It's not the affluent from the Main Line who spray graffiti on the walls, strew trash on the grounds, break the windows, and urinate in the stairwells. (Although residents who watch the drug activity say plenty of well-to-do youths go there to buy.)

But that ignores the fact that not everyone at Oak Street chooses to participate. Residents and Chester County Housing Authority officials contend many of the drug dealers come from elsewhere, perhaps as few as 10 percent of the residents are involved, they say.

But all Oak Street residents — including women and children whose poverty renders them unable to move — must deal with the fallout.

Parents describe their terror as they hear gunfire almost nightly. They have, according to one Housing Authority report, "expressed a deep concern, bordering on a panic, on how to raise their children properly in a drug-infested environment."

Coatesville, including Oak Street,

accounts for only 3 percent of the county's population. Yet the city is the scene of nearly 30 percent of the county's robberies, homicides and assaults. Coatesville police don't keep separate crime statistics for Oak Street — in fact, a long-standing complaint among residents is that police don't answer calls in the community to begin with — but police say 10 percent of all written complaints are generated in the development, while only 6 percent of the city's population lives there.

Dinniman acknowledges that the county has been "in denial" about Oak Street. But he says agencies and government officials are ready for a coordinated push.

Now, Dinniman says, "we have something happening in every area" — a new health clinic, a city enterprise zone that should provide jobs, a \$250,000 federal drug-elimination grant, more police activity, an active tenant council, and a seasoned Housing Authority board that expects to name a new executive director within weeks. (The board has been saying this for months.)

Dinniman says he hopes for "some kind of turnaround" by the spring. "You'll see some things happening in a few months that will show our seriousness and our resolve to get things under control in Coatesville," predicts Chester County District Attorney Anthony Sarcione.

"In '94, the drugs are going to leave the Hill," asserts William Merritt, a private consultant who lived in the project for a few months to assess the problems.

Is the story of Oak Street dismaying proof of the tenacity of poverty and drugs, or a testament to the stubbornness of hope and optimism?

Is this the year Chester County's agencies and leaders — and Oak Street residents themselves — will make it work?

■ Oak Street isn't what the nation had in mind when public housing



A boy hangs from a pipe beneath a walkway at the Oak Street project, which has few recreational outlets.

was instituted in 1937 on the heels of the Depression.

America's first "projects" were in response to a housing shortage and were for families that were poor — but presumably only temporarily. Residents were screened in much the same way as private-housing tenants, and it was considered something of a privilege to live in a project. Over the last three decades, the criteria for tenants have expanded, and the public-housing population has changed; the people moving in have far more diverse — and severe — problems.

Solutions over the years have ranged from making arrest sweeps to holding Bible classes for children. Some programs have worked. Some have not. Others have simply fizzled.

In some ways, residents see themselves as bait for grant money. They laugh about the woman who came to help them with stress management. "I can sit down and bitch about problems any time I want to," said one woman. "I don't need someone with a master's degree to tell me how to do that."

They wonder what ever happened to the guy who, more than a year ago, told them a food co-op would open in an empty unit a matter of weeks.

They receive a flow of graduate students who want to interview them about "what it's like to be poor."

A wry speculation persists: If someone just took all the money from the barrage of programs and promises over the years and divided it among the residents, they could move to better housing and be done with it.

At one point, a steel cable was installed across Hillcrest Drive to curtail the drive-up drug service on the street, but it was taken down shortly after because residents with legitimate reasons to use the road could not get in or out. Besides, residents said, the drug activity had simply shifted to a different area in the development.

One morning in August 1992, police fanned out at 5 a.m. and pulled 30 suspects from their beds. A year later, 29 were either in jail or headed there. Yet residents said the dealers who were arrested had been replaced within hours.

Before he left office in 1993 to become a Chester County Family Court judge, District Attorney James P. MacElree 2d pointed a finger at the local Police Department: "Any local police department that is permitting that is not doing their job adequately. ... They ought to run the bums off the corner."

Chief Dennis Alexander pointed back, contending that security was the county's problem and that a housing police force should be created.

Perhaps the community's darkest moment was Oct. 13, 1992, when three police officers were injured in an after-dark melee. A police officer from neighboring Tredyffrin dubbed the project a mini-Beirut.

■ For a long time, social workers were afraid to even go up to the project. Today, they and the drug dealers seem to have reached an odd, unspoken pact.

Drug dealers "kind of know us now," said Donna Carson, who works with a visiting-nurse program. "Not that the nurses haven't been propositioned. We wear our navy blue and white; they know we're to be left alone. If nothing else, they're congenial and helpful at times."

Carson recalled a recent visit to Oak Street when a man she presumed to be a dealer said, "Hi, ma'am, have a nice day."

"Extremely polite," she said later. And why not? Putting aside questions of legality and morality, aren't they the most successful businessmen the community has? Given Coatesville's jobless rate (6.9 percent), a cynic could make the case that dealing drugs is the best job opportunity around.

Chester County's new district attorney — as of one year ago — pledged anew to tackle the drug problem. Anthony Sarcione set up a task force of drug experts and came up with a plan, although he is unwilling to discuss details.

"We're doing a ton of things," Sarcione said, all aimed at "getting a grip on that place. ... The message we want to get out is that we're not messing around anymore."

The county has instituted a municipal drug task force among 25 police departments. It hired nationally known drug fighter Herman Wrice, of Philadelphia's Mantua Against Drugs, to lead anti-drug marches all over Coatesville, including Oak Street.

A little more than a year ago, the Chester County commissioners met in Coatesville to hear gripes about the drug flow, maintenance problems and lack of security.

Afterward, in a three-page "action plan," the commissioners pledged increased funding — amounting to about \$50,000 — for various programs. "We're accepting our responsibility," Commissioner Dinniman said after that meeting, labeling it "a turning point."

In December of last year, the head of the resident council, Christine Milbourne, and other residents called for another summit. They wanted to know what had been done.

An official summit has not taken place, but Dinniman talks with pride about a series of meetings involving the residents, county officials, Coatesville officials, heads of various county agencies and representatives of social-service groups.

His enthusiasm could be considered as much a measure of how bad things were as how far they have come. "It was the first time we all talked," he said.

He said action would follow: "It's all part of a puzzle, and when we get all the parts together, we will have significant opportunity for change."

"Three years ago, we'd see the police insulting the residents, the residents criticizing the police, the police saying the county is not together, the county blaming the police," Dinniman said. Now, things are

advertising "at the highest levels of the county."

And now, once again, there are plans to block off Hillside Avenue. In June, the Housing Authority announced to much fanfare that it had received a \$250,000 U.S. drug-elimination grant. The first phase called for building a security booth at the entrance to Hillcrest Drive.

So where is it? Things are on schedule, said an official with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. An architectural and engineering firm has been drawing up the specifications, after which the authority will advertise for construction bids. Bertha Dantzier, acting executive director of the authority, said construction could begin in April and be completed in June.

Meanwhile, the authority plans to advertise for a private security firm.

Sandra Simmons, head of the authority's advisory board, says that, once security is taken care of, she wants to link up with job-training programs, institute a public-relations campaign with industry and community groups to get funds and other support, and establish a scholarship program "as an incentive to encourage young people to stay in school."

Even so, Simmons is "not promising any pie in the sky. Whether that results in next year that there will be no drugs on the Hill, I doubt it. I certainly don't expect public housing to be a utopia."

■ What, in the end, will work for Oak Street?

All the officials — even those who are most emphatic about their own plans to help — say the real key to success lies with the residents, who ultimately have to do more for themselves.

They may get the chance.

The Housing Authority has applied for a \$14 million federal HOPE grant — the initials stand loosely for Home Ownership and Opportunity for People Everywhere. With the money, they'd raze three of the four buildings at Oak Street, build condominium-style units, and, within five years, turn everything over to the residents.

But only three residents showed up for a tenants' meeting in November to discuss the plan.

At December's tenant council Christmas party, Milbourne issued a plea to residents to get involved. "I'm tired," she said. "We're all tired."

Just weeks ago, one social worker who visits the project regularly noticed a new development. "We see a new training program going on for younger drug dealers," said the worker, who asked not to be named. "There's a fellow that's been up there, and you can tell he's training new drug dealers. Like the 11-year-olds."

Says Dantzier: "Drugs are a national problem. All we can do is use whatever resources we have. I don't think anyone can come in and say, 'This is it, this is going to work.'"

# FINAL

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