

'IT MEANS A HELL OF A LOT'

In wealthy Loudoun County, a small community may soon get clean running water

BY NATHANIEL CLINE
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Outhouses and porta potties. Low roofs and small doors. No running water.

This is still a way of life in the northwestern hamlet of Howardsville, just 20 miles from the modern mixed-use developments and data center alley in Ashburn, one of the most affluent communities in the country.

But after years of planning, the small, historically black community has been approved for a wastewater system to aid the few remaining locals.

"To have one of the highest median incomes and have people living in homes with no running water is just not acceptable," county Chairwoman Phyllis Randall (D-At Large) said. "It is unconscionable that we would let this continue in our county."

Howardsville sits northwest of Middleburg, south of Route 7. Eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, it was one of the first predominantly black communities in Loudoun County.

Following the Civil War, white property owners William and Mary Stephenson sold land to a dozen black people. But some of the properties don't adequately perc, preventing a septic system from functioning. The perc issue has dragged down property values and brought about water and sewer concerns that persist today.

"It was basically a tree lot," said Kim Hart, a local workforce housing builder. "It's got good groundwater, but the ground does not perc, and for that reason few of the houses have poor drain fields, and some have none at all. So, it's a mix of those who have sewer and water, and those who don't."

In hopes of helping Howardsville residents, Loudoun County completed a water and wastewater feasibility study in 2011. Last year, the county was able to establish a service district north of the community, Hart said.

"It's been a long-time coming, but really a fabulous thing to have happened," he said. "This is one of the last communities in Loudoun that does not have adequate



Times-Mirror Photos/Nathaniel Cline

Howardsville resident Thomas Reid looks around his community before Loudoun County begins construction on a wastewater sewer system.

water and sewer."

During the Reconstruction era, the Stephensons sold about 28 acres to black families. Each purchase cost between \$12 to \$80, according to descendant and historian Kevin Grigsby.

Grigsby is the author of "Howardsville," a book that details the area's storied past. He says the land was sold due to economic factors; instead of paying wages for farm laborers, property owners sold their land to formerly enslaved residents.

"It's quite a paradox that the early settlers of Howardsville, who had provided years of free labor as slaves, would then purchase land from those who had once enslaved them," Grigsby said in his book. "If ever a group of people was entitled to something for free, it would have been those early Howardsville landowners."

Seventy-four-year-old Thomas Reid, a Howardsville local and descendant of the Reid and Basil families, surveyed his surroundings during a recent walk through

his property. Gone are the days when up to a dozen people would call each Howardsville dwelling a home.

Reid and Grigsby care deeply about preserving what is left.

"It means a hell of a lot," Reid said. "It means a hell of a lot for me just to be here. This is where it all began."

He shared stories about his late mother, Alberta Basil, and the gravel road before it was paved. He chuckled as he talked about baths in a steel tub, where he picked up his nickname "Bubbles." A similar tub still sits in the yard. Reid reminisced about kids playing with tires and using rotary phones and neighbors working as stone masons.

Grigsby said it was important to preserve the community's history by writing "Howardsville," especially considering the dwindling native population. People leaning on each other has been a prevailing theme throughout Howardsville's history.

"If one ever goes through the book,

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LOCAL HISTORIAN
KEVIN GRIGSBY

you'll see the sense of caring is a common theme reiterated over and over again," Grigsby said. "I really think that's what helped many of those individuals persevere and helped pass the baton to younger generations to go on and achieve in education and careers, and the backdrop to all of that was a pretty cruel and racist world that a lot of the older generation had to endure."

On April 10, the Loudoun County Board of Supervisors ratified and approved the Planning Commission's proposal to create a community wastewater system for Howardsville. Supervisor Tony Buffington (R-Blue Ridge), though absent for the final vote, thanked his colleagues "for supporting this much-needed solution to ensure the health and safety of one of Loudoun's most long-standing and historic communities."

The board in 2015 approved \$1.47 million for the project through the county's Capital Improvement Program. The plans call for developing a community wastewater treatment system in Howardsville and expanding the service district for the Willisville community wastewater treatment system developed in 2007. Construction could begin early as 2020, according to county officials.

Meanwhile, Reid is happy to see people paying attention to the community he has long cherished.

"This is it," he said. "All of my memories, greatest memories, everything is right here."



Since acquiring land in the late 1800s, black people in Howardsville have added some additions to their modest homes.



Howardsville residents used wells to retrieve water after the Civil War. Some locals still use them in 2019.

HELP IN HOWARDSVILLE

Wastewater system on the way, county offering other assistance

BY NATHANIEL CLINE
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Having running water in the family home is a foreign concept to 74-year-old Thomas Reid.

But after several meetings with Loudoun County officials, things are changing around the Reid property in Howardsville, a small, historically black community in western Loudoun with about a dozen residents.

In the three months since the Times-Mirror first reported on the conditions in Howardsville — which include a lack of running water and sewer and houses in dire need of repair — county leaders have stepped in to assist the community's few remaining residents.

Beyond plans to install a community wastewater system, county staff has helped Howardsville residents qualify for Medicaid.

"You don't think about these things until you grow older. Every time you turn around and go to your doctor, he finds something wrong with you," Reid said.

Another assistance effort includes plans to provide an adequate water supply through a potable water source while a more permanent solution is being developed. Potable water comes from surface and ground sources and is treated to levels that meet state and federal standards for consumption.

Government staff has visited Howardsville to bring potable water, and in some cases the county has offered hotel accommodations during inclement weather and hot conditions.

"I understand from Mr. Reid that the county has really stepped up their efforts to give him some help, and that's just wonderful," local workforce housing developer Kim Hart, who has worked with Howardsville in the past, said.

The county has also provided Reid family members with options for home repairs and evaluated water well sites.

"County staff from the Departments of Family Services, General Services, Planning and Zoning, Building and Development, and the county administrator's office continue to work collaboratively to address the immediate needs for Mr. T. Reid and Mr. L. Reid, as well as provide services for the other residents of Howardsville. So, significant progress has been made since the last update," Public Affairs and Communications Officer Glen Barbour said in an email to the Times-Mirror.

Loudoun Habitat for Humanity is planning to construct a new home for one family and septic and water connections for another, according to Executive Director Therese Cashen.

"Loudoun Habitat is partnering with the Loudoun County Department of Family Services to provide for the families in Howardsville access to water and indoor plumbing — both critical to safe and healthy living," Cashen said. "Through the



Times-Mirror/Nathaniel Cline

Thomas Reid works in the yard of his Howardsville home. When filling his wheelbarrel, he has to avoid the hole that's formed after years of deterioration.



Habitat Home Repair program, we will be using our resources to build a home for one family and connect an existing home to water and plumbing for another family. We are excited to be part of this team effort that will improve the quality of life the members of the Howardsville community."

Howardsville sits northwest of Middleburg, south of Route 7. Eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, it was one of the first predominantly black communities in Loudoun County.

Following the Civil War, white property owners William and Mary Stephenson sold land to a dozen black people. But

some of the properties don't adequately perc — a soil evaluation that tests the rate at which water drains through the soil. The perc issue has dragged down property values and brought about water and sewer concerns that persist today.

The Loudoun County Board of Supervisors approved plans for the new wastewater system in April. The \$1.47 million project remains in the design phase, according to county records, with construction beginning as early as 2020. The plans call for developing a community wastewater treatment system in Howardsville and expanding the service district for the Wil-

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THOMAS REID,
HOWARDSVILLE RESIDENT

lisville community wastewater treatment system developed in 2007.

Since the board's approval, six homes have been evaluated for needed repairs to enable connection to the wastewater system and to ensure safe housing. Barbour said these improvements may utilize Federal Community Development Block Grant funds.

Until the system is installed, Reid said he will continue to get up early, take care of his home and find other ways to occupy his time.

"I guess I'll keep on doing and doing—laying down, getting up and coming out here to find things to do during the day," Reid said. "I believe movement is a necessity as we get older. If I didn't get out here and do this, I don't know what I would do."

You can follow the county's progress in Howardsville at Loudoun.gov/5087/Howardsville-Wastewater-Project.

COVER STORY

“When I initially heard about Mr. Reid, I was just in disbelief. It’s just difficult to put your mind around.”

VALMARIE TURNER, ASSISTANT LOUDOUN COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

HELP ARRIVES IN HOWARDSVILLE

Longtime residents get some relief for the holidays

BY NATHANIEL CLINE
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Living in a temporary accessory unit or trailer home isn’t too common in affluent Loudoun County.

But to 74-year-old Thomas Reid, a trailer is an upgrade from his family home on the same lot. The trailer actually has heat and running water.

Two days before Thanksgiving, a proud Reid gave the Times-Mirror a tour of his new trailer that includes a ceiling high enough for him to stand. In his family home, he has to lower his head.

For Reid, it’s the little things.

“Man, it’s almost still unbelievable,” Reid said. “When I first walked in, wow ... just looking at things the way they should be. I really appreciate it.”

Reid smiled and shared some stories as he sat on his couch. He said when he took his first hot shower in the trailer, he lost track of time — he was eventually forced out because the water temperature starting dropping. He laughed and danced in his chair as he mimicked how he tried rinsing off the soap under the cold water.

Reid said his sleep has improved significantly, too. He no longer has to wake up early to boil water, drop wood in the stove to keep the house warm or use the bathroom in an outhouse.

His portable toilet was picked up permanently Wednesday before Thanksgiving.

“Are you going to sit down one more time on the ‘John?’” Reid was asked.

He chuckled and shook his head left to right. “I’m going to sit back and say bye,” he said.

In the seven months since the Times-Mirror first reported on conditions in Howardsville — conditions that include a lack of running water and sewer, low-quality sanitation and houses in dire need of repair — county officials and local residents have stepped in to assist the few remaining residents in the small, historically black community in western Loudoun.

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Reid is one of two property owners



Times-Mirror Photos/Nathaniel Cline

Howardsville resident Thomas Reid stands up in the middle of his temporary home. His current home on the same plot, which has a lower ceiling, does not have indoor plumbing or running water.

in Howardsville without water and indoor plumbing. Loudoun County staff and other partners have been working for months to help Reid and the other 15 or so residents of Howardsville.

Beyond plans to install a community wastewater system, county staff has helped Howardsville residents qualify for Medicaid.

Government staff visited the community to bring potable water, which comes from surface and ground sources and is treated to levels that meet state and federal standards for consumption. In some cases the county has offered hotel accommodations during inclement weather and extreme heat.

The project has been a joint effort between departments of Family Services, General Services, Planning and Zoning, Building and Development and the county administrator’s office, according to county staff.

“When I initially heard about Mr. Reid, I was just in disbelief,” Assistant County Administrator Valmarie Turner said. “It’s just difficult to put your mind around, but I am confident in knowing that Loudoun County did everything.”

Department of Family Services Assistant Director Sarah Coyle Etro complimented her colleagues and partners on the project, saying, “We still have a long way to go within the community, but very excited we’re able to get to this point.”

Loudoun Habitat for Humanity is planning to construct a new home for one



Loudoun County Human Services and other partners have helped improve the living conditions for Howardsville residents. At least two do not have indoor plumbing and water.

family and septic and water connections for another, Executive Director Therese Cashen said via email.

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have been evaluated for needed repairs to enable connection to the wastewater system and to ensure safe housing. Barbour said these improvements may utilize Federal Community Development Block Grant funds.

Board of Supervisors Chairwoman Phyllis Randall (D-At Large) brought the item forward and welcomed unanimous support from her colleagues.

“For him to be in that house for another winter is something I didn’t want to happen,” Randall said. “So now he has a house with running water and working facilities and a stove. It was the right thing to do.”