

The Times

METRO

A HOME OF THEIR OWN



PHOTOS BY FRANK JACOBS III/THE TIMES

The ribbon was cut for 10 new homes at Titus and Pennington avenues in Trenton yesterday. From left are Robert Kahan of Tara Developers, new homeowner Tracey Ames, Mayor Douglas H. Palmer, Marge Della Vecchia, executive director of the New Jersey Housing and Finance Agency, and the Rev. John H. Harris Jr. of Galilee Baptist Church.

Affordable development gives renter families a fresh start

BY LISA RICH
STAFF WRITER

TRENTON — If you asked them two years ago, what does “snip, snip, snip” mean? They wouldn’t be thinking of three bedrooms, two bathrooms and a one-car garage.

Not too long ago, city natives Tracey and Theodore Ames lived in a one-bedroom apartment in Morrisville, Pa. It wasn’t exactly an ideal place to dwell: cramped, overpriced and away from work.

But yesterday, a big pair of scissors cut a ribbon in front of the Ames’ new home in Trenton, joining 14 other homeowners who bought newly built houses at Titus and Pennington avenues.

“Finally,” breathed Tracey Ames, standing among the African art that modestly decorates their living room. “I grew up in Trenton, and me and my husband want to stay and raise our children here. Now we can.”

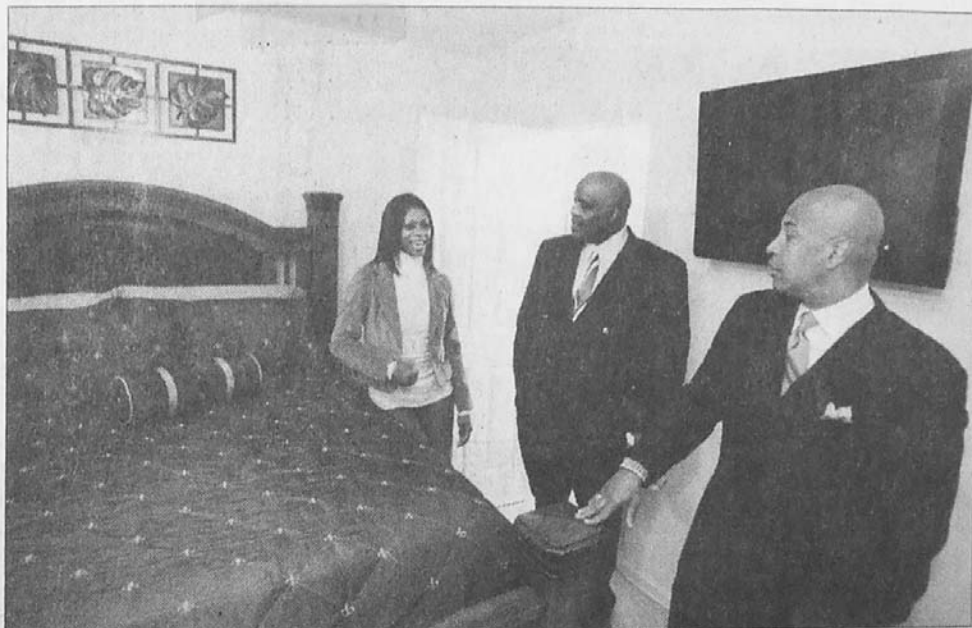
Tracey, a secretary for the city’s school district, and Theodore, a social worker, no longer have to worry about commuting to their jobs. Plus, they feel safe around the neighbors.

The \$3 million project consists of 15 green-friendly houses constructed by Tara Developers, in conjunction with Galilee Baptist Church, the city and state.

The prices range from \$85,000 to \$109,000 to \$127,500, said Robert Kahan, principal of the Trenton-based Tara Developers.

But who-paid-what for their home is a secret.

“The intention is the homes ought to



Ames, Harris and Palmer look over a bedroom in Ames’ new home.

be no different because of the price,” Kahan said. “They’re built the same, and the homeowners should be treated the same.”

Some homeowners with higher incomes paid more than those with less for an identical house built by the development company. The homes are the same size and have the same amenities.

This particular project began two years ago, but the vision of providing city residents with safe, affordable housing has been under way for 20 years, said the Rev. John H. Harris Jr., pastor at Galilee Baptist Church.

When Harris moved to Trenton two decades ago, to be frank, his wife wasn’t

exactly pleased.

“The first day we moved here, my wife stood on the front steps and said, ‘You brought me to this?’” Harris said. “When I looked around at the deplorable conditions, especially here on Titus Avenue, I told her to give me some time; I’d try to make it better.”

Now, he said, the couple is happier to live in the state’s capital, as they are seeing improvements in neighborhoods each year — thanks to the joint redevelopment efforts.

Together, the minister and Tara Developers have completed several development and affordable housing projects

[See **HOMES**, Page A4]



FRANK JACOBS III/THE TIMES

The Rev. John H. Harris Jr., pastor of Galilee Baptist Church, speaks at the opening. He said of the area when he moved there, "When I looked around at the deplorable conditions, especially here on Titus Avenue, I told (my wife) to give me some time; I'd try to make it better."

HOMES

CONTINUED FROM PAGE A3

A fresh start for tenant families

across the city.

In addition to the homes on Titus and Pennington avenues, the group has built 10 new affordable homes on Brunswick Avenue and is in the process of finishing 22 new homes on Broad Street.

But the success of such endeavors often depends on the new homeowners' abilities to pay off their mortgage on time.

Mayor Douglas H. Palmer spoke of the "tremendous foreclosure crisis" that has arisen in Trenton and

around the country.

In Trenton alone, nearly 600 residents are facing foreclosure. State officials have said that across New Jersey, there have been 6,000 foreclosures since Feb. 1.

The city has developed 500 affordable homes over the past few years through regional contribution agreements, though which suburban towns pay Trenton to build their share of mandated affordable housing. Palmer said only 10 of those units built in the city have been foreclosed.

"That shows us that knowledge is power," Palmer said. "Counseling our new homeowners is a defense against foreclosures."

The new homes celebrated yesterday are expected to see success from this initiative, said Marge

Della Vecchia, executive director of the New Jersey Housing and Finance Agency.

"These homeowners have access to long-term, fixed-rate, non-funny mortgages," Della Vecchia said. "We will make sure they are able to stay in their homes."

Economic experts analyzing the mortgage crisis have placed much of the blame on lenders giving out loans to applicants who did not have the financial means to deal with interest rate increases or regular monthly payments.

The homeowners of the recently completed development at Titus and Pennington avenues, however, underwent rigorous screening to ensure their steady income and ability to maintain a mortgage, Kahan said.

"All potential buyers first had to attend credit counseling and classes before even being considered," he said.

Additionally, the city, state and developer each verified the homeowners' incomes and debts, he said.

For Tracey Ames, the process of buying her home in Trenton proved more beneficial than renting an apartment.

"We were paying \$800 a month just to rent one bedroom," Ames said. "And here we are, back in Trenton, paying the same amount on a mortgage for so much more space, and we're owners."

Smiling again, she repeated, "we own this house."

Contact Lisa Rich at lrch@njtimes.com or (609) 989-5692.