

## **Macon Housing – a world class local agency**

By Rick Maier

If you want to see some positive and exciting things happening in Macon, take a drive around town with John Hiscox, Executive Director of the Macon Housing Authority. You'll quickly realize what an important contribution MHA makes to our community and how well John and his team are executing their mission to provide affordable housing.

John navigates city back streets with vigor, managing to visit a dozen neighborhoods in an hour. I had thought the Authority dealt only with big, multi-family projects, so I was impressed with the wide variety of smaller neighborhoods and single-family homes that I never would have connected with public housing.

“That place used to be a crack house,” says John, pointing to one beautifully renovated house in the Prince Nussbaum community. Down the street he points to another, “the only reason that house still stands is because the termites are holding hands. We'll have to rebuild it.”

MHA is just as concerned with providing space for day care and outreach programs such as Aunt Maggie's Kitchen Table, than in vacancy rates or collecting rents (which run only 1% delinquent). Even the older MHA neighborhoods are tidy – neat lawns, trimmed bushes, and well maintained exteriors. But John laments that even though the units are often in better shape than homes in surrounding areas, you can spot older public housing by their barrack-style layout.

But that's changing. The hottest trend is for MHA to enter limited partnerships with private investors and developers to create neighborhoods such as Baltic Park and Tatnall Place (under construction on the former site of Oglethorpe Homes) that are as appealing as any suburban apartment village.

The number of families served by MHA over the past twenty years has nearly doubled to 4,500 families, while the number of staff has remained constant and dramatically smaller than other cities our size. “The Macon Housing Authority is better recognized around the country than in Macon,” says director and businessman Earl Benson. “And John could command several times his salary as a CEO in private industry.”

What makes the Authority so successful? It's not big federal grants, which have all but dried up in the past twenty years. It's not overwhelming demand, because most lower income families would rather get vouchers for privately-owned housing than live in public housing.

Hiscox's 23 years of experience and no-nonsense style of leadership are key contributors, but John credits his staff for the agency's success. They run the place like a nimble network of virtual teams, using the latest business strategies to create imaginative

projects involving sophisticated financing arrangements. Macon gets more than its share of federal and state funds because MHA stays two steps ahead of authorities in other cities.

John praises the Authority's board of six directors who are highly involved in MHA's 14 special purpose partnerships and subsidiaries. Plus the Authority collaborates with dozens of government and non-profit agencies, many of whom operate within the neighborhoods.

And Hiscox walks the talk. He had the connections to have barbed wire removed from the top of a fence bordering one of the neighborhoods. His office is situated in the middle of the South Central neighborhoods of Tindall Heights and Felton Homes, and John lives two blocks from 2009 Vineville, MHA's latest development near St. Peter Claver Catholic Church.

I did find one weakness - MHA has no website. "Not a priority," says John, "but we'll get to it."

During my tour and visit, I kept asking myself one question. What if all government agencies operated this efficiently?