

Atlanta Journal-Constitution, The (GA)

June 18, 2002

Section: News

Edition: Home; The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Page: A1

GIVING A LIFT IN ATLANTA: Bush boosts homeownership

JIM THARPE; Staff

President Bush pledged Monday to narrow America's "homeownership gap" during a visit to Atlanta that included of new middle-class houses on ground that until recently was racked with blight.

The president, speaking to 450 invited guests at St. Paul AME Church, said he wanted 5.5 million new African- Ar and Hispanic homeowners by the end of this decade to help close the housing divide between whites and minoriti

"I believe there is such a thing as the American dream," Bush said during the late morning speech. "And I believe of us who have been given positions of responsibility must do everything we can to spotlight the dream and to mal the dream shines in all neighborhoods, all throughout our country. Owning a home is a part of that dream."

Saying government must make it easier for people to secure a down payment, Bush promoted his Single Family Affordable Housing Tax Credit to encourage homeownership in blighted areas. He also promised to convene a WI House conference on the issue this fall.

Bush cited statistics that about 75 percent of white Americans own their own homes while fewer than 50 percent c African-Americans and Hispanics are homeowners. In Atlanta, 37,000 whites own the homes they live in, compare 35,000 blacks, despite the fact blacks outnumber whites nearly 2-1.

Bush's two-hour visit was his third to Atlanta this year. The president chose the city for Monday's remarks because diverse population and its urban renewal efforts, aides said.

Bush got a warm and at times enthusiastic reception as he waded into the predominantly black, traditionally Demc turf of south Atlanta. The president and Housing and Urban Development Secretary Mel Martinez were greeted wi 30-second standing ovation when they entered St. Paul's.

Before the speech, Bush toured **Park Place South**, part of the Pryor Road redevelopment corridor. Masharn Wils entrepreneur credited with launching the project, served as tour guide as Bush spoke with new homeowners at the development, where town houses range from \$130,000 to \$170,000.

"His trip was important because individuals in this area can see his commitment to affordable housing for everyone just for gentrification," Wilson said.

Park Place is being built on ground that was formerly Lakewood Village, a crime-plagued housing project that was for the new development. It eventually will include 534 units, including 100 rental apartments for senior citizens.

Bush toured Unit 203 at Park Place and chatted with its owner, Ken Beatty, an environmental assessor who plans move in this month.

"He wanted to know about the area and the difficulty of becoming a homeowner," Beatty said after he and Bush ta the kitchen, the air smelling of fresh paint.

Bush originally was slated to tour a nearby development on land cleared when another housing project, Carver Hc was demolished for mixed-use housing. However, the president opted for Park Place because, aides said, the development is geared toward home- ownership.

A handful of protesters dotted his Pryor Road motorcade route. One man held a sign that read, "15,000 Homeless

"I think it's misplaced priorities," said Mat Creighton, 23, of Virginia-Highland, one of the picketers. Creighton said believed building a handful of homes for first-time buyers would do nothing for the thousands of homeless people Atlanta.

But Frederick Hicks, 35, a recording engineer who grew up in a Pryor Road housing project, commended the pres as he awaited the motorcade. "He's trying to lead them to the right thing," Hicks said.

Gloria Bromell-Tinubu, chairwoman of the nonprofit Community Alliance of Metropolitan Parkway and a former Atl mayoral candidate, said she was encouraged by Bush's message.

"There's a lot that we have to do in terms of affordable housing," she said. "There are too many people falling thro cracks -- particularly at the lower end. I'm ready to see the action. But I'm encouraged by what I heard."

The president renewed his call for volunteerism by recognizing Darryl Hicks, who has labored for Habitat for Hum Atlanta for a decade. Hicks, who works for AGL Resources, plans to start a new volunteer effort soon serving mee the Atlanta Union Mission.

"He's interested in lending his heart and his talents to helping a neighbor in need," Bush said. "America can be ch one heart, one soul, one conscience at a time, so long as we are willing to love a neighbor like we'd like to be love ourselves."

-- Staff writers Jill Miller and Milo Ippolito and researcher Nisa Asokan contributed to this article.

Photo: Trey Alston, 4, shares a moment in the spotlight with President Bush on Monday at St. Paul AME Church. president urged opening homeownership to 5.5 million black and Hispanic families by the end of the decade. / RIC ADDICKS / Staff

Photo: President Bush tours **Park Place South** on Monday (above) and gets some instruction in pouring concrete construction workers. // RICH ADDICKS / Staff

Photo: At nearby St. Paul AME Church, Bush (left) set the goal of helping 5.5 million minority families buy their ow home by 2010. / RICH ADDICKS / Staff

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