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Southwest Atlantans cheer Bush Residents proud to show changes in neighborhood

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The presidential motorcade was a welcome sight Monday for many on Pryor Road, where dilapidated housing is being replaced by new homes and apartments.

Residents, most of them African-Americans or Mexican immigrants, gathered outside in the pleasant midday sun to catch a glimpse of President George W. Bush waving from his limousine as he visited the southwest Atlanta neighborhood to draw attention to its improvement.

Doris Bradford, 69, sat in a wheelchair in front of the low-income Pryor Court apartments across the street from St AME Church, where Bush spoke about homeownership initiatives. She likes the changes she's seen in her neighborhood.

"In a few years, it made a complete turnaround," Bradford said. "They're doing an excellent job. I've been here about 20 years, and I think it's a great accomplishment."

While support for the president and for the ongoing neighborhood improvements appeared strong, a few protesters set up picket signs questioning the president's priorities.

Mat Creighton, 23, of Virginia-Highland held a sign that read: "15,000 homeless + 6 homes = 14,994 homeless."

A block away, a woman under the shade of a big red umbrella held a sign that read: "Republicans = symbols, no substance. Democrats did these. This is the house that Democrats built."

In fact, much of the work to improve the neighborhood predates the Bush administration. But Republicans say that in the years they have championed the idea of empowering people to buy homes, and they plan to continue the successful efforts that drew bipartisan support in the past.

"We're building on a good thing. The follow-up is going to be very significant," said Sunny Warren, former Gwinnett Republican chairwoman. "Public housing projects have not worked. It works much better when people are homeowners. That's where black Americans need to be."

Kiana Hamlett, who sang in the choir for the president's visit, found Bush's speech "motivational." As a church member, she has watched the neighborhood change, although she lives outside the area, she said. The improvement was especially meaningful to her when she recently returned from college, she said.

"It really needed a face-lift," Hamlett said. "The crime rate in this neighborhood was really bad at the time."

For children attending summer camp at Arthur Langford Recreation Center, the president's visit offered a spectacle. They lined the street waiting for the man in the long black car with the police motorcycle escort. Finally, the limousine sped by, and Bush waved from behind the closed window. The children were full of questions they never got to ask.

"Can I be his assistant?" said Kwame Carter, 11.

"What kind of work does he do?" said Christopher Williams, 11.

"How does it feel to have a White House, a big old house," said Phillip Teasley, 12.

"Why doesn't he come here more often?" asked Brendaysha Burke, 11.

The president delivered his speech next to the site of the former Carver Homes, a public housing project converted, mixed-income apartment complex through a public-private partnership. For government officials, Carver is symbol of success in the effort to transform public housing. But residents say life still is far from perfect.

The suburban-style complex looks nice but was not built to last, said Louise Watley, former community association president, who had lived at Carver since the 1950s. Watley, who sat "down front" for Bush's speech, is known in both Democratic and Republican circles as an influential grass-roots campaigner. She's also known for speaking her mind.

"The only problem I have with it is the quality of the work," Watley said. "They really are poorly built. It's cheap stuff you wipe a spot off the wall, a hole comes in the wall."

Same goes for the carpet, she said. "When you walk on it a while, it looks like a wet dog."

On top of that, developers tore down the recreation center, the community center and the ball fields, she added.

"To me, it was a waste of taxpayer money," Watley said.

Photo: President George W. Bush joins Masharn Wilson Monday on a tour of **Park Place South**, formerly Lakewood Village. The president's tour highlighted changes in the area./ RICH ADDICKS / Staff

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