

Sarasota Housing Authority building affordability without the stigma

William Russell arrived 20 years ago to lead SHA from insolvency to a robust provider of diverse affordable housing opportunities for a healthy mix of incomes.



Sarasota Housing Authority CEO William Russell addresses the Sarasota City Commission.

Photo by Andrew Warfield

William Russell arrived in Sarasota two decades ago with a mission: Restore to good standing, the embattled Sarasota Housing Authority with the federal Housing and Urban Development and return it to local control.

In 2005 Russell left his three-year position as HUD deputy assistant secretary to guide the SHA out of receivership, control of the organization having been taken over by the federal agency because of multiple contract violations including boarded-up vacant units and residences regularly failing HUD inspections.

“We were basically insolvent,” Russell said.

With the agency heeding the pleas of city and county elected officials and residents, Russell was offered the opportunity to move from Washington, D.C. to become CEO of the SHA, reporting to a semi-retired HUD employee, Carmen Valenti, who happened to live here at the time, and still does.

“He was essentially my board for the first three years,” Russell said.

Girded for a task he said typically takes “years, and years, and years,” it took only three to wrest control of the agency from the federal government.

"I like to say it was fastest and most effective HUD receivership in HUD history," Russell said. "I hired a very qualified staff. I just surrounded myself with really good people and we were off and running. HUD turned us back over to local control in 2008, and I've been here ever since."

With a bachelor of arts in political science and government at Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi, and a master's in public administration from Syracuse University, Russell was prepared for a career in government. He served as a federal legislative representative for the City of New York Housing Authority, parlaying that experience to the high-level position with HUD before landing in Sarasota with no intention of staying.

"I really didn't think I would be here very long," Russell said. "First of all, I love it here. And second, we've been doing so much development that there's just always been so much going on at any given time. It's exciting, and it's challenging.

"We're making a real impact."



William Russell, CEO of Sarasota Housing Authority.
Courtesy image

1,200 units and counting

On Monday, Russell appeared before the Sarasota City Commission to provide an update on the SHA's activities.

Established in 1938, the SHA, in partnership with HUD, had built 635 public housing units from 1941 to 1978, but prior to Russell's arrival, had built none since. In the last 20 years, Russell has led the effort to build 665 units, beginning with the opening of Janie's Garden I in 2009 with 86 apartments. The second phase followed in 2012 with 68 more apartments.

Meanwhile, at the national level HUD was leading a transition from traditional public housing — heavily subsidized projects that resulted in overly concentrated pockets of poverty — to a hybrid model that blends subsidized units with Section 8 vouchers and others not subsidized, all affordable to those at 80% area median income or lower.

"It's got a much greater mix of incomes," Russell said of the model that blends a variety of socio-economic demographics.

The result is low-income housing that can appear as anything but. Lofts on Lemon, which opened with 128 residences in 2022 on Cohen Way, is one such example. [The second phase, Lofts on Lemon II](#), is slated for completion in 2026.

Also opening with 84 units in 2021 and 2022 was Amaryllis Park Place, the first of multiple phases now branded Cypress Square that will occupy the former The Courts, the 1950-built rows of duplexes currently under demolition. Those developments, plus others in the planning pipeline, lend the appearance of market rate apartments.



The first phase of Cypress Square apartments, legally named Amaryllis Park Place Phase II, was completed in 2022. Future phases of Cypress Square will replace The Courts (below), which is under demolition.

Photo by Andrew Warfield



The Courts is being demolished to be replaced by future phases of Sarasota Housing Authority's Cypress Square.

Photo by Andrew Warfield

In that pipeline are 308 more apartments, including the 100-unit Lofts on Lemon II and future phases of Cypress Square. By the time those projects are complete in 2027, SHA will have 1,508 units in its portfolio, excluding the not-yet funded McCown Tower 3 [and the long-range redevelopment of the 100-unit Bertha Mitchell duplexes](#) into an apartment community of up to 770 units. That project alone will expand the SHA's total units by nearly 50%.

Depending on how long the Bertha Mitchell redevelopment takes to plan and build, whether the 55-year-old Russell can see that through completion remains to be seen. Affordable housing projects take considerably longer to develop than their market-rate for-profit counterparts, particularly when it comes to organizing the funding.

"It's tough to get an affordable housing deal funded, closed and developed," Russell said. "Our capital stacks give people a headache, but that's the challenge that also makes it rewarding when it comes to fruition. And of course, seeing all these new families move in and call it home. That's super rewarding."

That's why Russell, whose expertise is well applicable to the private sector, stays in his non-profit lane.

"I've always been drawn to public service," he said. "I did work in the private sector, but I feel like this is my calling. And as opposed to the three years I spent at HUD — and I had an important job and we did important things — it's much easier to see the fruits of your labor at the local level. We've implemented a lot of youth programming that we didn't have before in early childhood education and youth development because I don't want the youth growing up in our housing to be our future clients. That's also been my passion."

An evolving housing mix

Besides increasing its inventory by 112% over 20 years, the SHA has shifted its portfolio mix in types of housing it provides. Russell told commissioners two decades ago the SHA provided "no real affordable housing" — workforce housing for which the residents pay 100% percent of the rent.

Occupying 41% of SHA's inventory in 2005, traditional subsidized public housing where HUD directly pays the housing authority has shrunk to 3%. Those holding Section 8 housing choice vouchers compared to 74% occupied in 2005, 53% of SHA's inventory in 2025. Affordable housing, which is not subsidized and was nonexistent in SHA's 2005 portfolio, currently stands at 11%. Project-based rental assistance units remain unchanged since 2005 at 6% of the inventory.

The point being the days of providing government-assisted housing in the form of what had become known as "the projects" are history.



A rendering of Sarasota Housing Authority's Lofts on Lemon II.
Courtesy image

With all this activity comes a future challenge. The SHA is running out of locations in the city for meaningfully sized developments, hence turning to redeveloping sites such as The Courts and Bertha Mitchell with higher density projects. The SHA is also employing HUD initiatives such as its Neighborhood Stabilization Program, which provides emergency assistance to stabilize communities with high rates of abandoned and foreclosed homes and to assist households whose annual incomes are up to 120% percent of the area median income.

“Through neighborhood stabilization we are able to acquire privately owned sites and rehab or redevelop them,” Russell said. “I’ve had developers approach us about partnering, where we provide some of our project-based vouchers to help subsidize the development. That’s a win-win for them and the community because they get to house low-income people in those units, but they also get market-rate rents.”

Regardless of the project type, Russell said the creation of affordable and government-assisted housing is “immensely satisfying,” albeit ideally transitory,

“I remember in the early days,” Russell said, ‘meeting with residents and saying, ‘You’ll probably never hear a landlord tell you this, but I don’t want you to live with us long-term. I actually want you to move out and move on your life.’”

Sarasota Housing Authority inventory and projects

SHA-HUD Development Timeline

- 1938: SHA established
- 1941: Orange Avenue (60 units)
- 1950: The Courts (100 units)*
- 1960: Bertha Mitchell (100 units)
- 1970: McCown Tower (100 units)
- 1971: Janie Poe and Cohen Way (72 units)
- 1978: McCown Annex (75 units)
- Total HUD-sponsored units: 635

**Now under demolition for Amaryllis Park Place (Cypress Square)*

SHA/Social Housing Funding Corp. redevelopment timeline

- 2009: Janie’s Garden Phase I (86 units)
- 2012: Janie’s Garden Phase II (68 units)
- 2013: King Stone (28 units)
- 2013: Diamond Oaks (15 units)
- 2016: Janie’s Garden Phase III (72 units)
- 2021-2022: Amaryllis Park Place (84 units)
- 2020-2022: Lofts on Lemon (128 units)
- 2023: McCown Tower (100 units)
- 2023-2024: Cypress Square (84)
- Total SHA-sponsored units: 665

SHA re-development pipeline

- 2025-2026: Lofts on Lemon II (100 units)
- 2025-2026: Cypress Square II (108 units)
- 2026-2027: Cypress Square III/Central Gardens (100 units)
- Total units funded in pipeline: 308
- Total units available or under development: 1,508**

***Excluding The Courts*



AUTHOR

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