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the self-governing states). This may be said to make possible the creation of a new system of land ownership and usage. This function might, in the long run, be far more important in bringing about a new land dispensation in South Africa.

The Commission will have to consider the planning and development of land, whether for residential or agricultural purposes.

The Commission has invited people who feel that they have a claim in respect of land from which they have been removed, or have a contribution to make in resolving the problem, to get in touch with it. They will find the Commission very receptive and very open.

The extent to which it will be able to make a meaningful contribution in respect of one of the most difficult and most important issues in our public life will very largely depend upon their constructive involvement and participation. ●

‘ *If this is what the new South Africa is going to be like, then we are going to win. We are going to be roaringly successful.* ’

Room for optimism

WESTGATE, Ridge Park, The Grange. These most southerly Pietermaritzburg suburbs tumble down a long and verdant decline to the west of the Richmond Road. They are, to look at, nothing out of the ordinary: quite modest, in fact. Yet they house a community which appears to have stepped into the vanguard of multiracial local government in South Africa.

The first of these southern suburbs, The Grange, was built in the early 1970s to provide economic rented accommodation for low-income white families. Westgate followed in the late 1970s and Ridge Park (a low-cost private development) several years later. In the early 1980s, when the State's policy shifted from housing provision to ownership and self-help, most of the properties passed into private hands.

At least two years before the repeal of the Group Areas Act black families, under nominees and closed corporations, were taking advantage of reasonable prices and moving in. After the repeal, the trickle became a substantial flow, although many white owners had not the means (or the inclination) to move out.

Was this a recipe for plunging prices and racial tension? On the contrary, prices have held steady, and the integration process has given rise to the Southgate Area Charter.

In a nutshell, the Charter — described recently as a “mixture between a body corporate in a townhouse complex and a neighbourhood watch” — will draw the home-owning community together through common goals such as security, beautification, public amenities, and codes of conduct — all designed to enhance the quality of life, reduce tension, and of course to protect the value of property.

At a public meeting held in The Grange school hall late in January, an enthusiastic senior municipal official told the audience of 500: “This should be the model for the city; in fact, it should be the model for the whole country.”

TO UNDERSTAND more fully the implications of the Charter, and how it works, it is worth starting at the beginning.

Enter Albert Nash, a Pietermaritzburg real estate expert who has served on the national executive of the Institute of Estate Agents of South Africa, as well as heading the local branch. In the late 1980s Nash turned his thoughts to the implications for the property market of the repeal of Group Areas. It did not take him long to realise that the black demand for white housing would be considerable, not least because families who could afford to do so (and there were plenty of these) would be only too willing to move closer to their places of work, and to improved public amenities, and at the same time as far as possible from the many black areas around the Natal capital plagued by the province's endemic political violence. He foresaw, too, that it would be the white lower-income groups who would be at the interface of this rapid suburban integration.

“For 40 years, the Nationalist Government had been taking the country down a highly regulated, separatist road,” Nash says. “Then, all of a sudden, they changed direction. They took away the old regulations, and left a void. People felt unprotected, vulnerable, wary. That was when I began to think of some form of neighbourhood charter.”

The essence of the Charter, some elements of which Nash picked up on visits to America, is succinctly expressed when he asserts: “If you can get people to arrive at a common goal, the cultural and political aspirations become secondary.” Almost inevitably, then, the Charter concept is based on goal-oriented management techniques where KRAs (key result areas) are identified and strategies for achieving the desired results are developed. Some of the overarching goals for a racially mixed suburb, Nash reasoned, would surely be in the



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areas of security, health and hygiene, household occupancy numbers and activity, vehicle numbers per property, noise and nuisance control, beautification; all elements in the quality of life and of amenity which householders sharing a common area would be keen to protect and enhance.

"It seemed to me vital that goals should be realistic and attainable, and that everyone be encouraged to participate in achieving them," Nash says.

Participation, and communication, would be ensured by the division of the neighbourhood into 10-house cells, each of which would elect a head person. Three such cells would be under the care of a group leader who in turn would communicate directly with an umbrella Charter committee. And the whole structure would be given teeth by the recently-passed Abolition of Racially Based Laws Act of 1991.

This Act makes provision for Area Committees of six people to be formed and to control conditions — including such issues as overcrowding, use of property for commercial and other endeavours, noise levels — in the areas of their jurisdiction.

In terms of the Act, such committees are then empowered to submit agreed controls for ratification by the local authority. Once ratified, these local area "rules" would take precedent over existing by-laws.

Remarked one experienced official: "For years we have been under pressure to relax the by-laws, especially relating to property use in the various town planning scheme zones. Now communities can decide for themselves. It wouldn't surprise me at all if, under this new system, these regulations aren't actually tightened up as people seek to protect the overall quality of their neighbourhoods."

THE BEAUTY of the system, of course, is that smallish groups of property-owners will be able to make their own rules and will have the legal backing to make them stick.

These legal provisions fitted perfectly with Nash's neighbourhood charter ideas. But where to test them?

His eyes turned naturally to the most southerly suburbs, since, by the third quarter of 1991, they were the most racially mixed in Pietermaritzburg. He enlisted the help of Councillor George de Beer, in whose ward these suburbs

lay. To the three suburbs of Westgate, The Grange, and Ridge Park, they added the older but northerly-adjacent area of Fairmead. Here, then, was a cohesive suburban block comprising around 1 200 properties, more than 60% black owned, more than 30% white owned, and with a smattering of Indian and Coloured home owners tossed into the brew. Even a new name emerged: Southgate.

De Beer canvassed people in the suburb, finding the older white residents in the telephone book, the newcomers in the records of estate agents. An initial meeting of 30 canvassed people was called. After lengthy debate, a Southgate Area Charter steering committee was elected. At the public meeting in January, to which all home owners and residents were invited, this committee was re-elected and enlarged as the inaugural committee.

The names of the members are revealing: Edwin Mkhize, chairman; Willie Beukes, vice-chairman; Johan du Randt, secretary; Anthony Mlotshwa, Jonathan Swift, Patricia Dubuzana, Maxwell Sithole, Leon du Toit, Wilson Mathonsi and Alida Nowlan.

"I feel we have a chance," chairman Mkhize says. "We are all different racial groups and we need to learn more. But I am optimistic."

Neither does his optimism appear unfounded.

Stories are beginning to emerge. There's the one about the white woman who felt her black neighbours were trying to force her out; a committee member intervened. Or the one about a new black family which brought with them three goats; the problem is in the process of being resolved. Or the family who dumped their refuse in an open space until the chairman of the committee himself spoke to them. (As Mkhize points out: "Many of these people were living in areas where there are no by-laws, but we are trying to make it clear to them that in town it is important for them to learn the rules and be friendly with their neighbours.")

Braai magic:

*"Soon the kids
were playing
together"*

One summer evening, an Afrikaans-speaking committee member mowed a piece of grass in an open space and held a

braai for his neighbours; a few of them stood in the shadows, watching; "but soon the kids were playing together," an observer remarked, "and then the adults began to get to know each other."

Mkhize himself testifies to the growing credibility of the Southgate Area Charter committee. "Two women brought a small child they had found wandering in the street. I said: why do you bring it to me? They replied: because you are the Charter chairman. I made contact with the police, but before they arrived a man came to claim the child. I said: why do you come to me? He gave me the same reply."

THE CHARTER committee's legal adviser has suggested that they draw up two types of charter: one in terms of the conditions laid down in the Abolition of Racially Based Laws Acts, which would cater to property owners only in terms of agreed legal requirements; and a wider charter to embrace everyone living in the area, including tenants and family members. It is in this broader charter that much of the community building effort will be enshrined. The inaugural committee is currently working on these documents, but with careful plans to "check back with the community at all times".

Once the charters have been accepted, the committee will operate like a small local authority, responding to its constituency's needs, liaising with the Pietermaritzburg City Council as the supplier of major services, and attending to the day to day running of the area. It is envisaged that a small administrative office will soon be opened.

What is the atmosphere like in the working committee meetings?

Mkhize responds: "Sometimes you find people have different attitudes. But if someone makes a mistake, it is important not to expose or belittle that person. I would say we are getting on reasonably well. There will be ups and downs. What we are trying to do will not happen overnight. But I can say truthfully, there is no aggression. Nobody is walking out."

Remember the enthusiastic senior official at the public meeting in January who said "this should be the model for the whole country"? He also said: "If this is what the new South Africa is going to be like, then we are going to win. We are going to be roaringly successful."

Over-enthusiastic, perhaps. But there certainly appears to be some room for optimism. ●