



Reframing public housing in Richmond, Virginia: Segregation, resident resistance and the future of redevelopment



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ABSTRACT

This paper is a three-part assessment of the history of public housing in Richmond, Virginia and an account of current efforts to create a progressive model for public housing redevelopment in the city. Part One provides a short history of Richmond's creation of nearly exclusively African-American public housing in the East End of the city in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, and describes a regional context in which virtually all public housing in the entire metropolitan area is located within a central city that is home to just one-sixth of the overall metro population. Part Two provides an account of the Blackwell public housing complex in Richmond under the Hope VI program, beginning in the late 1990s, and an account of the tenant activism that arose in response to the many problems and shortcomings with that project. That activism later resulted in the tenant-led coalition Residents of Public Housing in Richmond Against Mass Evictions (or RePHRAME). Together non-profit and tenant activists in RePHRAME have collaborated over the past several years to challenge redevelopment practices that threaten to diminish the number of public housing units in the city. Part Three is an in-progress report on an effort we are each personally involved in that includes participation by RePHRAME members as well as several community organizations and leaders that have been part of the RePHRAME coalition: to create a new resident-driven, progressive redevelopment process for the city. This process aims to build consensus among city policymakers and many tenants that redevelopment of the city's highly concentrated public housing units for the sake of improving opportunities and living conditions for residents is a moral imperative. Recognizing and articulating the history of segregation, mismanagement, and deep distrust between residents and public authorities, this process takes seriously the deep-seated and legitimate concerns of tenants with the aim of assuring much more positive outcomes in future redevelopment processes.

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1. Introduction

Over one hundred and fifty years after the end of the Civil War in the United States, Richmond, Virginia continues to bear both the label and the burden of the “Capital of the Confederacy.” Racial segregation—inscribed through policies and practices throughout the 19th and 20th centuries—shows up both in the historical sites and tours from the Slave Trail, American Civil War Center, and Valentine History Center's exhibit of sit-ins during the Civil Rights Movement—and in the persistent location and lived experience of African American public housing residents. Like Baltimore (R. Williams, 2004), Chicago and Atlanta (Vale, 2013), among other cities, Richmond leaders in the mid-twentieth century built and maintained segregated public housing. In Richmond, this resulted in the construction of low-rise public housing concentrated primarily in one area of the city (the East End) and

housing nearly exclusively African Americans. In a regional context in which virtually all public housing in the entire metropolitan area is located within the landlocked central city and the city and surrounding counties operate under separate governments, Richmond adopted a recipe virtually guaranteeing the generational perpetuation of extreme poverty. Richmond's current child poverty rate is 39%—rising to as high as 75% in the five census tracts comprising the core of the East End. This concentration of racialized poverty, combined with neglect by the city and missteps by the Richmond Redevelopment Housing Authority (RRHA) on Richmond's only HOPE (Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere) VI grant in the 1990s, created isolated and neglected public housing communities and bred deep tenant distrust of the RRHA.

In the face of these overwhelming challenges, public housing resident activism emerged in 2008 in response to redevelopment plans for Gilpin Court, the oldest public housing development in Richmond. Like public housing tenants in Baltimore (R. Williams, 2004), Chicago (Feldman & Stall, 2004), and San Francisco (Howard, 2014) who forged community bonds and employed a range of formal and informal practices to challenge the state to improve public housing, public housing residents in Richmond joined with non-profit and citizen allies to fight

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against mass eviction, displacement, and reduced public housing units. Even after the redevelopment plans for Gilpin Court stalled, residents from across different public housing communities continued to advocate for infrastructure and policy improvements and one-for-one replacement of public housing units in future redevelopments. These efforts have been largely successful in persuading RRHA and city leadership of the critical importance of engaging and empowering residents as partners in redevelopment processes, and hence have helped create a more inclusive paradigm for redevelopment work. The coalition's sustained activism during the RRHA's shuffling of redevelopment priorities and continued focus on Richmond's troubled history demonstrate the ways in which racial and spatial history can inform current debates and fuel activism around public housing redevelopment.

This article provides a brief historical overview of public housing's role in the political economy of racially stratified Richmond. Particular attention is given to a case study of the Blackwell HOPE VI project, whose well-publicized difficulties cast a long shadow over current redevelopment debates in Richmond. The following section, drawing on interviews with resident leaders as well as participant observation, documents the emergence of a vocal and increasingly effective resident organization in the 2000s that formed a community-wide coalition to challenge redevelopment proposals that did not guarantee one-for-one replacement of housing units. Some of these leaders in turn helped shape the City's comprehensive poverty reduction initiative—the Maggie L. Walker Initiative for Expanding Opportunity and Fighting Poverty. While many questions remain about the capacity of the RRHA and the city to fulfill stated commitments to pursue future redevelopment in ways that engage all residents and leave no resident worse off, this civic activism has played a key role in altering the policy paradigm in Richmond.

2. Framing public housing in the early years

The RRHA was formed in 1940, amidst a local political climate that was largely hostile to subsidized housing of any kind, let alone high-quality, racially integrated public housing. When Virginia passed enabling legislation for public housing authorities in 1939, cities such as Alexandria and Newport News moved quickly to take advantage of federal funds to eliminate slums and develop public housing ([\\$2,000,000 in federal funds available here for housing, July 20, 1949](#)). Richmond delayed. Ideological opposition to seeking federal aid during the Depression, combined with deep fears of black residents influx into white neighborhoods, created a shaky foundation for the creation of public housing in the state's capital. While the city government had shown some support for private-public housing plans in the 1930s, federally subsidized public housing sparked opposition. Mayor J. Fulmer Bright, in office since 1924, argued that creating a Housing Authority “violates every principle of sound business, democracy, Americanism, individualism, and other fine traits” (Silver, 1984, p. 147). Bright worried about the long-term impact of public housing: “I believe that these very Federal housing projects, now being constructed to relieve the ills of which we complain, will in themselves constitute the slums of the next generation, 20 years hence” (Silver, 1984, p. 147). Fearful that public housing would push out families who could not afford the rent payments and would create a “preferred class of citizens,” Bright vetoed the City Council's narrow vote to form a public housing authority (Silver, 1984, p. 147). The mayor's non-interventionist approach to development cost him the 1940 election. Gordon B. Ambler, a supporter of slum clearance, public housing, and annexation took office as mayor and the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority (RRHA) was formed in 1940.

3. Constructing segregation

During its first two decades, the RRHA, in conjunction with city government, created a public housing program that reinforced the racial

and spatial segregation solidified in the first three decades of the twentieth century by Jim Crow, redlining, and short-lived attempts at race-based zoning.² With federal funds in place, the RRHA designated the first 297 units of federally subsidized public housing units “for Negroes” ([Negro housing project named Gilpin Court, June 20, 1941](#)). Built in 1942 in Jackson Ward, an African American community once known as the “Harlem of the South”, the slum clearance project held out the promise of ameliorating high death, crime, delinquency, and tuberculosis rates in the 9.6 acre tract ([USHA awards city's housing \\$750,000 more, February 28, 1941](#)). The opening of Gilpin Court was the first of many urban development and urban renewal projects that drastically altered African American neighborhoods in Richmond. Notably, only 25 of the 576 applications for Gilpin Court came from families who had previously lived in the cleared area (Campbell, 2012).

World War II and Richmond politics delayed the expansion of the public housing program even after the passage of the federal Housing Act of 1949 offered significant funding opportunities for low-rent housing. While the federal government earmarked two million dollars for two additional public housing projects in July 1949, the Richmond City Council debated both the need for the units and the reliance on federal money. Polarized citizens stormed Council chambers presenting “vehement arguments for and against public housing” and ultimately stalling the creation of much-needed affordable housing ([U.S. housing plan survey argued here, October 27, 1949](#), p. 1). City Council finally approved the RRHA's request and \$1,312,080 in federal funding in February 1950, setting in motion the development of 504 units for African American families in the East End at Creighton Court, and 402 units for white families in the Southside at Hillside Court ([Slum work is endorsed by council, February 28, 1950](#), p. 1). Acknowledging that both locations were distant from the city center, the RRHA and Planning Commission shortsightedly noted, “transportation and accessibility to schools would offer minor problems” ([Plan board selects sites for housing, August, 23, 1950](#), p. 1). Opened in 1952, the projects' segregation by race and location signaled the entrenchment of segregation in Richmond public housing. Future public housing development primarily was spatially and racially concentrated in the East End as housing solely for low-income African Americans. This intentional segregation weakened the public housing program and eroded tenant opportunity.

Over the next decade, urban renewal, highly contested highway construction, and urban redevelopment plans solidified a pattern of displacement of African Americans from traditional neighborhoods in the city. Between 1955 and 1957, more than 7000 people—10% of the city's black population—were displaced by the creation of the Richmond-Petersburg Expressway and Belvidere Street extension. Thousands more lost their homes (in the 1960s) due to the construction of the Downtown Expressway (Silver, 1984). By the end of the 1950s, the city had destroyed 4700 units of housing in black neighborhoods, replacing them with 1736 units of public housing (Campbell, 2012).

Public housing was touted as a critical resource but was not one that displaced families readily embraced. The RRHA constructed three additional family developments near Creighton Court in the East End: Whitcomb Court (1958), Fairfield Court (1958), and Mosby Court (1962), concentrating 1848 units of public housing for African American families within an approximately one-mile radius. The Gilpin Court Extension added 338 units in 1957. Displaced black families increasingly sought alternatives to living in public housing, which had quickly become stigmatized. As planning scholar Christopher Silver noted, “Many who chose public housing did so as a last resort It was the stigma of life in the ‘court’ that made public housing a poor substitute for the neighborhood environment they had been forced to relinquish” (Silver, 1984, p. 196). The destruction of black neighborhoods

² See <http://dsl.richmond.edu/holc/> for an interactive view and analysis of the 1936 Homeowner's Loan Corporation map of Richmond. The persistence of race and class-based segregation has continued. For information on race-based zoning in Richmond and elsewhere see C. Silver (1997).

and ensuing displacement, coupled with continual racial segregation, concentrated African Americans in the RRHA's seven family multi-unit projects: by 1979 only three households out of 3093 units were white (Richmond Redevelopment & Housing Authority [RRHA], 1979).

As the national stigma against public housing intensified and the federal government cut funding for the program in the late 1960s and 1970s, the RRHA shifted its focus to senior housing and scattered site urban redevelopment for low-income families. African American neighborhoods again bore the brunt of federal bulldozers. The RRHA's last clearance project under urban renewal was in Fulton where engaged residents put forth different visions for their renewed neighborhood. None of these visions came to pass—instead the area was razed. In 1970, the RRHA and the city began demolishing the 2800-person multi-generational neighborhood, finishing three years later (Campbell, 2012). Mandatory relocation housing payments and down-payment assistance required under the 1970s Relocation Act helped residents relocate across the city but the scars of urban renewal on the area remained (Silver, 1984). The RRHA failed to rebuild quickly, leaving acres of land vacant. Construction on single-family homes began in the 1980s and still continues today.

4. HOPE for public housing?: Blackwell and renewed resistance

The delays and contestation over redevelopment in Fulton echoed as the RRHA attempted to revitalize its role and the public housing program in the Blackwell neighborhood in South Richmond. Developed in 1970 as one- and two-story scattered-site apartment units, two decades later public housing in Blackwell was seen as a complete failure. Located in a neighborhood with the city's lowest median income, highest crime rate, and fewest homeowners, Blackwell became the focus of the RRHA's first—and only—HOPE (Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere) VI grant (Adams, October 9, 1997). The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) started the ambitious HOPE VI program in 1992 with the goal of improving some of the worst public housing projects in the country by redeveloping them into mixed-income neighborhoods and thus deconcentrating poverty (National Housing Law Project et al., 2002). The competitive grant process required Housing Authorities to leverage additional public and private monies for redevelopment, to create buildings that blended in with the surrounding area, and to use 15% of the grant for community and supportive services with the aim of increasing tenant self sufficiency. The results of the program have been mixed at best: as scholar Edward Goetz explains, “high concentrations of poverty have been eliminated when residents are forced to move,” however, most residents relocate “to other high-poverty and racially segregated neighborhoods that are unlikely to provide them with greater opportunities from which they came” (Goetz, 2013, p. 175). Implementation of the program in Richmond was riddled with problems.

In 1997, the RRHA submitted a HOPE VI grant application to acquire and demolish blighted housing structures and to demolish and replace the 440 units of scattered site public housing in Blackwell with multi- and single-family housing for a range of incomes. The plan called for relocating half of the neighborhood's 4000 residents into similarly priced housing across the city while giving others the option of staying in the neighborhood and purchasing a home. A new school and community center were also proposed to enhance the area (Adams, October 9, 1997). Chairman of the RRHA board, Oliver Singleton, viewed the HOPE VI revitalization effort as a form of reparation for building scattered public housing sites within a once-stable neighborhood: “The problems in this community are being addressed with bulldozers. We destroyed this community in 1970 when we put 440 public housing units in a 1000 home community” (Hickey, March 18, 1999, p. B-1).

This vision for Blackwell and the reality of redevelopment diverged. Delays in funding, significant changes in the plan, leadership changes at the RRHA and HUD, and increasing distrust of the RRHA by residents undermined neighborhood revitalization. In 1998, a year after winning

\$27 million in HOPE VI funds and a pledge of \$10 million in city funds, a major component of the plan—a new 150 apartment complex to include 30 low-income units for relocated Blackwell public housing residents—was withdrawn. Opposition by Southside neighbors and some city council members killed the project, forcing the RRHA to scale back its plan from building 261 multifamily units and 208 single family units—some to sell at market rate—to 148 units for low-income residents and 188 single family homes on site (Hickey, November, 29, 1998).³ The plan for the creation of a mixed-income housing under HOPE VI in Richmond, as in many other cities, meant a reduction in public housing units. With the first federal funds finally released in 1999, demolition on existing housing began. Speaking at the opening ceremony, Vice Mayor Rudolph C. McCollum, Jr. signaled the possibilities for change: “We're demolishing destitution. We're demolishing doubt” (Hickey, March 18, 1999, p. B-1). With the new Blackwell Elementary school opening in September 1999, the redevelopment efforts seemed to gain momentum, but not for long.

4.1. Losing hope in Blackwell

The growing disconnect between residents and the RRHA eroded tenant trust as the agency actively restricted resistance. Residents began criticizing the RRHA in 1999 for “treating them like second class citizens” (Hickey, September 3, 1999, p. B-1). Three hundred residents turned out to share their frustrations with state Representative Robert Scott. At issue was the RRHA's decision to disband the Self Sufficiency and Community Building Task Force, an advisory body to the RRHA—required by HUD—on administering the HOPE VI program. Many of the original twenty Blackwell residents on the advisory committee had ceded their seats to leaders outside the community, including noted activist, Donald Hatcher; local political candidate and activist, E. Martin Jewell; and former city council member, L. Shirley Harvey. Consequently, the committee clashed with the RRHA, arguing for improved communication and more information for residents regarding plans, service providers, and budgets. Rather than compromise, the RRHA disbanded the committee, squelching tenant advocacy. “Those meetings are very, very disruptive ... they are unproductive,” Tyrone Curtis, RRHA's director of housing operations, soon to become head of the Housing Authority, noted in justifying the decision (Hickey, September 3, 1999, p. B-1). The RRHA promised to form a new committee and to select the members, fueling many tenants' distrust of the organization.

Over the next four years, tenants' fears over relocation and their right to return, and the RRHA's plan for a reduction in public housing units further diminished tenants' confidence in the Housing Authority. Leadership turnover at the RRHA and long delays in rebuilding in the Blackwell neighborhood also undermined the Housing Authority's reputation in Richmond. With 440 units of public housing demolished, RRHA's shifting redevelopment plans—all of which called for a major reduction in public housing units—coupled with the surrounding counties refusal to add to their small stock of subsidized housing, created a grim reality for displaced tenants and other low-income families in need of affordable housing. Blackwell public housing resident, Lander Freeman, an opponent of HOPE VI from the start, claimed that, “HOPE VI did nothing for most and did something for a chosen few. For most, it did nothing but displace them” (Setegn, May 12, 2001, p. A-1). Of the 440 displaced families, a small number returned, including families in 25 units of public housing and two families purchasing homes in Blackwell

³ RRHA's initial application for HOPE VI funding in 1997 called for a total of 801 housing units: 261 multi-family units in Blackwell and 325 to be constructed in the Fulton and Swansboro neighborhoods, and 208 single family units in Blackwell and seven elsewhere. A revised plan in October 1998 reduced the total of planned units to 480: 148 multi-family units in Blackwell, 24 off site, and 188 units of single-family units on site and 120 off site (Johnson-Hart, 2007, p. 42). By 2010, the RRHA had changed the plan again to include 161 multi-family units in Blackwell, including 75 for public housing apartments, and 68 off-site, and 188 on-site and 122 off-site single family homes (RRHA, 2010).

(Setegn, May 12, 2001). The remaining families, according to a study of the relocation program by Lallen T. Johnson-Hart, did not fare well: over half of the households moved to other distressed neighborhoods in Richmond with 45% of residents moving into public housing (2007). While the 37% of households using vouchers moved to “better neighborhoods”—defined by Johnson-Hart as ones that “represent increased access to basic services and opportunities” in terms of housing quality, household income, job density, transportation, and amenities—public housing residents appeared to move to less stable communities (2007, p. 3). Likewise, 85 families did not receive relocation assistance from the RRHA due to evictions, abandonment of apartments, or moving outside public housing (Setegn, May 12, 2001). Overall then, the HOPE VI program reduced poverty in Blackwell while reconcentrating it in other poor neighborhoods in the city.

Support for relocatees came through the community and supportive services required by HUD as part of HOPE VI. Started in 1997, the Community Self Sufficiency Program (CSSP) was the RRHA’s vehicle for aiding public housing residents through five focus areas: homeownership, job training and placement, education placement, and referrals (Johnson-Hart, 2007). This program of services support was arguably the most successful aspect of the Blackwell redevelopment, at least initially. At its peak, the CCSP included six relocation and self-sufficiency professionals that aided 125 original residents in finding jobs, placing 115 in job training programs, and aiding 14 in becoming homeowners (Johnson-Hart, 2007). In 2004, the RRHA significantly reduced the CSSP staff to two full-time workers and a part-time consultant. This reduction weakened the efficacy and evaluation of the much-needed support services.

Between 1999 and 2008, former public housing residents hoping to return to the Blackwell area had very limited opportunities to do so as only 75 units of public housing—part of the Townes of South River complex completed in 2004—had been completed. No single family homes had been built and the holes in the landscape served as a reminder of failures of the HOPE VI program in Richmond. Abandoning its strategy to have one master developer build all the homes in Blackwell after construction and negotiation delays, the RRHA established a multi-phase process with the aim of hiring different developers for each stage (RRHA, 2010). After interviewing Blackwell residents as part of a study on the failures of HOPE VI nationally, Shelia Crowley, then president of the National Low Income Housing Coalition, underscored the pressing problems of the Blackwell case: “The promises were either overstated or lies ... And there was little follow-through and massive amounts of displacement took place, and people have been scattered and no one knows what happened to them” (M. P. Williams, September, 18, 2008, p. B-1).

While the RRHA made repeated claims to have “learned valuable lessons” from Blackwell, the perceived failure of the project, along with the continued reduction in public housing units, galvanized public housing tenant activism as talks of redeveloping Dove Court in the Northside and Gilpin Court began in late 2007 (M. P. Williams, September 18, 2008, p. B-1).⁴ As the RRHA worked on a plan for redeveloping Dove Court, a 60-unit “mini-Gilpin” pilot on the Northside and other projects into mixed-use and mixed-income communities, tenant concerns grew (Martz, December 26, 2007). Creighton Court resident and chairman of the Richmond Tenant Organization and vice chair of the RRHA board Marilyn Olds questioned if there “are enough places in Richmond that are affordable ... at this time. If we have so much space available, why is the (RRHA) waiting list so long now?” (M. P. Williams, September 18, 2008, p. B-1).

5. Residents’ organized resistance: RePHRAME

With the lessons of Blackwell as a foundation, public housing residents and advocates “committed to housing justice for all in Richmond,” formed the Residents of Public Housing in Richmond Against Mass Eviction (RePHRAME) in 2008 (RePHRAME, 2010). This coalition of public housing residents and organizational and individual allies banded together to center the rights of public housing residents in the face of possible redevelopment. Staff at the Legal Aid Justice Center, the legal counsel for the Richmond Tenant’s Organization (RTO), and some residents saw the need for a separate organization in response to RTO’s “drifting off-track” as the RRHA started the redevelopment process of the Dove Court public housing project (Levy, personal interview by E. Goetz, November 2013). Tenant leaders of RePHRAME saw the strategic value in aligning with partners to form an activist coalition. Founding member and public housing resident Cora Hayes explained, “we wanted to include other organizations to partner with us, to use some of their expertise” (personal interview by E. Goetz, November 2013). By building a strong network, working on a unified message, and aligning efforts towards clear goals, RePHRAME members set up a structure to impact public housing development in Richmond. The coalition and persistence of members have helped sustain the organization. Activist, public housing resident, and RePHRAME founding member, Lillie Estes, noted “I think we have enough people who are significantly frustrated with how stuff has not been working over time that if we can structure out a process and you know no matter what stick with it, you will eventually start seeing things” (personal interview by E. Goetz, November 2013).

Public housing residents and organizational representatives from Legal Aid Justice Center, Richmond Jobs With Justice, Virginia Organizing, Richmond Food Not Bombs, the Richmond Peace Education Center, and the Richmond Tenants Organization, and others, set out a bold set of demands in response to local and national trends seen in redevelopment and ensuing displacement and marginalization of public housing residents:

- 1) “There should be 1-for-1 replacement of any public housing units lost through public housing redevelopment In addition, newly created public housing units and other aspects of the redevelopment process, should increase employment, education, and other opportunities of public housing residents.
- 2) Current residents should have the right to return to newly developed public housing without any additional screening or requalification process.
- 3) Public housing residents should have a meaningful voice in decisions regarding their housing and communities RePHRAME proposes two additional seats—along with the current one seat for a resident—to the RRHA Board of Commissioners which would be filled with RRHA residents.
- 4) Instead of requiring tenants to mail their rent checks out of state to Baltimore and risk late fees, public housing tenants should have a local rent payment option” (RePHRAME, 2010).

Using a range of community organizing strategies, including door-to-door canvassing, letter writing, speaking at RRHA Board of Commissioners meetings, engaging the press, and holding large-scale annual meetings, RePHRAME has consistently applied pressure to the RRHA and city officials and has seen important successes. In November 2010, the RRHA—in response to RePHRAME’s calls for action—announced it would create a local payment system for public housing residents starting in April 2011. RePHRAME and public housing residents celebrated the change that would save many tenants paying late fees incurred through express mailing and mail delays due to inclement weather (RePHRAME 2010).

Public housing tenant representation on the RRHA Board of Commissioners was also championed by RePHRAME members who urged City Council to expand board membership. The Board consisted of one resident representative. “I think it’s clearly a challenge when you have a

⁴ The RRHA bought and demolished 216 vacant apartment units near Dove Court as part of the revitalization plan. The 50-acre community of 311 units of mixed-income for-sale and rental units opened in 2013. Relocated tenants complained about the lack of places to go as private landlords turned away Section 8 vouchers.

Board of Commissioners who are made up of people who don't live in public housing," Lillie Estes explained ([M. P. Williams, September 14, 2010](#), p. B-1). City Council responded by expanding the Board of Commissioners from seven to nine members—including a second spot for a tenant or Section VIII recipient—in 2010. In January 2012, LaToya Hawks joined Marilyn Olds as the Board's second resident commissioner.

The foundation of collaboration and the organizational structure of a coalition has helped sustain RePHRAME over time. Arguably, the leadership and dedication of a handful of tenant activists, including Lillie Estes and Cora Hayes, and a few partners has been fundamental as well. The early visibility and successes of RePHRAME have receded over time and attendance at the annual meeting has declined. At the same time, tenant activists from RePHRAME have emerged as critical leaders in shaping the city's affordable housing agenda and strategy as part of a mayoral mandate to address the pressing problem of poverty in Richmond.

6. Resisting poverty

In spring 2011, Mayor Dwight C. Jones, appointed a commission of over 40 community leaders representing social service providers, clergy, elected officials, academics, advocates, community developers, public administrators and business leaders to research and recommend strategies for reducing the city's poverty rate—now at approximately 27%. The final report was released shortly after Jones was sworn in for his second term in January 2013, having won re-election against token opposition. The report provided historical explanations of Richmond's legacy of concentrated poverty and detailed analysis of the demographics and geography of poverty in the city, before going on to consider policy remedies. Five key policy priorities were identified:

- Expanding the City's newly created workforce development center in order to train and support residents seeking full-time employment at living-wage jobs.
- Economic development initiatives targeted towards creating quality job opportunities for adults with a high school diploma or less.
- Building a regional bus rapid transit system to connect City residents to suburban job opportunities (the Richmond region was ranked in the bottom 10 among the nation's 100 largest metro areas in a Brookings study of job accessibility by transit).
- Pursuing dramatic improvements in the City's school system and educational outcomes, from early childhood investments to expansion of career readiness and college access.
- "Achieving the redevelopment of much of the city's public housing stock without involuntarily displacing residents, with the aim of weakening the concentration of poverty and improving the physical and social environment of public housing residents" ([City of Richmond, January 18, 2013](#), p. 2).

The Commission's language with respect to public housing issues was carefully crafted to reflect two competing concerns: a sense of urgency held by many of the city's political leaders that the status quo with respect to the extraordinary concentration of poverty in public housing communities is unacceptable and will require complete 'transformation'; and a desire, shared by a number of advocates involved in the Commission, to avoid the mistakes of Blackwell and prevent massive dislocations.

Following release of the report, the Commission work went into a second phase aimed at identifying actionable steps the City could take to advance the five goals, spearheaded by Councilwoman Ellen Robertson and Thad Williamson in conjunction with the Mayor's staff. This work entailed the creation of seven new task forces charged with making very specific policy recommendations and identifying price tags. It also involved creating a Citizens Advisory Board intended to

give low-income residents a voice in the process; the Board, which included Lillie Estes and another public housing resident among its eight active members, reviewed and provided comment and feedback on the proposals.

The Housing Task Force brought together a wide-range of stakeholders to devise an implementation strategy to move forward the Anti-Poverty Commission recommendations. By this time, both the RRHA and the city had shelved the Gilpin Court project and turned attention to pursuing redevelopment strategies in the four public housing communities of the East End, starting with Creighton Court.⁵ Fourteen members, including four public housing residents—one a designated representative from RePHRAME—the CEO of the RRHA, city officials, non-profit leaders, and a consultant for the developer hired to revitalize Creighton Court signed on to participate. Amy Howard chaired the task force, receiving buy-in early on for doubling the recommended number of public housing residents on the task force from two to four, and holding all the meetings in the East End near the proposed redevelopment area. After spending two meetings on group process, the task force assigned subcommittees, met regularly as a large group, debated, discussed, and ultimately proposed three recommendations:

- 1) securing adequate and sustained capitalization of the city's Affordable Housing Trust Fund;
- 2) with strategic alignment from the City and RRHA, contracting facilitators to develop and lead an open, transparent, and inclusive process for establishing citywide principles to guide all present and future redevelopment of public housing. These principles will transcend leadership turnover at the city and agency levels and will be developed by an inclusive community process with significant engagement by residents at all public housing developments—spanning various age groups—neighbors, non-profits, civic associations, elected officials, city employees, developers and other stakeholders;
- 3) the hiring and training of six part-time housing advocates, and a full-time supervisor, to aid with lease compliance and procedures and other RRHA regulations (translating the bureaucracy); to work with residents on eligibility and application for programs such as the Family Self Sufficiency Program and Section 3 work program; to help with community building and communication between the RRHA, residents, and others. The Task Force also recommended that the hired advocates would be public housing residents with strong community relationships and that they would not be employed by the RRHA ([Maggie L. Walker Initiative for Expanding Opportunity, 2014](#)).

As a result of the task force work, and vetting by the Citizens Board, Mayor Jones committed to funding nearly \$3.4 million in action steps to launch a comprehensive anti-poverty initiative, including the establishment of the Mayor's Office of Community Wealth Building, which is charged with coordinating the effort (Williamson was named the Office's first Director in April 2014). Housing initiatives accounted for \$1.2 million of this initial budget, including \$1 million for capitalization of the City's Affordable Housing Trust Fund, \$160,000 for a community navigators program, and \$40,000 to conduct a Citywide discussion about public housing redevelopment aimed at generating binding principles to guide future redevelopment.

At the same time as proposals from the Anti-Poverty Commission came to fruition, the City began the process of the first envisioned redevelopment project, aimed at replacing the 504 units at Creighton Court with a 1300-unit mixed-income development that would set aside 30–

⁵ Public discussion of the Gilpin Court (Jackson Ward North) redevelopment plan virtually ceased after RRHA CEO Anthony Scott left the position in spring 2011. At the same time, both city leadership and a wide range of community organizations turned attention to the comprehensive revitalization of the East End, with a view to securing either a Promise Neighborhood grant, a Choice Neighborhoods Initiative grant, or both.

50% of units in the new community as public housing equivalents. Preliminary development plans call for use of the land at the existing Creighton site as well as nearby underutilized land on the former site of Armstrong High School and scattered sites throughout the City. Planning for the first phase includes 128 of the 256 units on the Armstrong site to be public housing equivalent, set aside for current Creighton residents; the new units at Armstrong are to be completed before any redevelopment at Creighton itself takes place.

One measure of the success of the efforts of affordable housing advocates in Richmond is that the concept of one-for-one replacement is no longer a matter of serious debate, but is widely accepted by principals in the effort. (It does not hurt that a version of one-for-one is now a requirement of federal funding for redevelopment projects under the Choice Neighborhood Initiatives program, from which Richmond hopes to receive funding support.) Likewise, city officials, as well as the hired consulting firm The Community Builders, regularly stress a commitment to linking redevelopment to better economic opportunities, workforce supports, and improved local education. The increased local investment in workforce development resulting from the Anti-Poverty Commission work at least creates a realistic prospect that the redevelopment process might in fact lead to genuine poverty reduction rather than simply deconcentration.

While RePHRAME as an organization is not currently a major influence in the Creighton Court efforts, the impact of its activism on current development in Richmond is significant. At the policy level, the City and housing authority now publicly affirm the principle of one-for-one replacement, the need for robust resident participation as full partners in redevelopment processes in Richmond, and the critical importance of providing strong layers of support to residents in the transition process, including working to bring more economic opportunities to the East End and connecting more residents to such opportunities. (Here it is worth stressing that even the planned redevelopment of Creighton touches only a fraction of the public housing footprint in the East End, and place-based investments intended to support the Creighton redevelopment process may also benefit the East End more generally.)

At the community participation level, two RePHRAME activists (Lillie Estes and Ceonna Johnson) sit on the Maggie L. Walker Citizens Advisory Board, established formally in 2014 to provide ongoing input into the City's poverty reduction initiative; by ordinance, eight of the Board's fourteen members must be residents of high poverty communities and at least two must be public housing residents or Section VIII recipient (currently a total of five members are public housing residents). Two RRHA tenants also sit on the nine-member board of the housing authority. In the Creighton Court redevelopment process, a tenant-led organization called Informed Neighbors, consisting of Creighton Court residents, meets regularly with the housing authority and City staff to provide input and exchange information concerning the project's development.

Nonetheless, the Creighton Court project still faces significant obstacles, from effective community engagement and buy-in to obtaining adequate funding to proceed. There also are the formidable tasks of making a long stigmatized area of the city attractive to middle-income residents and securing the needed ancillary public investments (such as new school construction) to anchor the revitalized neighborhood. Looking further ahead, the City's ability to pursue redevelopment of other communities while retaining a commitment to one-for-one replacement is hampered by continued resistance from surrounding counties to any prospect of public housing units, meaning the landlocked City must largely go it alone for the foreseeable future. Even within the city, affluent neighborhoods in the western half of the City have little appetite for accommodating significant units of public housing, meaning that the disproportionate concentration of the poverty population in the East End will continue indefinitely, though the poverty rate might fall in the East End if middle and higher-income households are drawn into the neighborhoods by redevelopment. That scenario—in effect, a controlled gentrification strategy for achieving

poverty deconcentration—will likely generate its own tensions and problems. One underutilized resource the City has at its disposal to create new affordable housing opportunities is a significant number of vacant or tax-delinquent properties (estimated at over 3000 citywide), which might be brought into productive use as a part of a comprehensive affordable housing strategy.

The dilemmas, conflicts, and tensions surrounding public housing in Richmond as the community seeks ways to begin undoing the legacy of Jim Crow while showing respect for current public housing residents will not dissipate anytime soon. In particular, the ongoing tension between Richmonders who see concentrated public housing as a vivid symbol of racial oppression and those who see it as a last bulwark in a tattered safety net will continue—unless or until Richmond witnesses a successful example of redevelopment that respects residents' needs and rights. The challenge both grassroots and formal leaders in Richmond face is creating spaces and processes where both perspectives can be genuinely valued, in ways that lead not to paralysis but to constructive change that expands opportunities and respects people's right to decent, affordable housing.

Disclaimer

Note: This article reflects the authors' scholarly views, not the views or policy of any organization.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2015.10.007>. These data include the Google map of the most important areas described in this article.

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