

The Washington Post

Protecting D.C.'s Diversity, Affordable Housing Residents Join Agency to Resist Displacement

June 30, 2005

By Robert E. Pierre

Washington Post Staff Writer

With its airy entrance and new windows and appliances, and with a jazz band playing under a tent, the Fairmont on 14th Street NW might easily have been mistaken yesterday for a ritzy new condominium throwing a gig to announce its arrival in the neighborhood.

But the featured guests at this party were longtime District residents celebrating the fact that they were not being forced to leave. Across the city, buildings and homes that once housed low-income residents are being renovated, sold and rented to the highest bidder.

"A lot of people have already been priced out," said Robert McDowell Bey, 65, who grew up in the District. Not everyone makes \$70,000 or \$80,000 a year, he said.

That's quite all right at the Fairmont because nearly all its residents qualify for Section 8 federal housing subsidies that pay two-thirds of their rent. It's been that way at the building since 1975 and will remain so for another 15 years as part of an agreement among private funders, residents and local and federal housing officials.

It was the second such event in two days. The other, at 1330 Seventh St. NW in Shaw, also drew city leaders, including Mayor Anthony A. Williams (D), who said hard work and perseverance are needed to prevent "rampant gentrification and displacement."

"It is especially critical that the city commits its resources to supporting those who are working to purchase, revitalize and preserve affordable housing," he said.

Those sentiments were echoed by D.C. Council member Jim Graham (D-Ward 1), who reminded residents that several former Section 8 buildings -- more than 3,000 units -- along the 14th Street corridor, including the Fairmont, could have had a different ending.

"Each and every one of these buildings could have been condos," he said. "People could have been put out . . . but we did not want to lose our diversity."

And many residents simply refused to sit on their hands and get pushed out. That was the case at 1330 Seventh St. -- formerly Immaculate Conception Apartments -- where Arnetta Longus has been a tenant for a dozen years.

As the new Washington Convention Center was being built, Longus said, residents worried about being pushed out, and they met with the owners in October 2000 to ask whether the building

would be sold. They were told it would not. Seventeen months later, they were shown a third-party contract for a proposed \$6.5 million sale.

But the residents did not panic, Longus said. They used the city's first-right-of-purchase law to partner with the Community Preservation and Development Corp. and secure the funding needed to buy the building and fund the \$21 million renovation while keeping it affordable. Residents will remain renters, though they will have some say in how the 136-unit property is run. At Tuesday's event, Longus wore a T-shirt that said tenants weren't going quietly and were ready to fight back.

It was that fighting spirit that kept the Fairmont from going market-rate, said Jackie Britt, who has lived in the building for 12 years. Abandoned after the 1968 riots, the building had come on line in the 1970s as a long-lease property dedicated to housing the urban poor. But like dozens of other buildings across the city, the Section 8 lease expired in recent years, just as investors were thirsty for real estate that could be spruced up and sold as condominiums to affluent residents. Its residents also were willing to fight.

"Nobody wanted to have a part of this city when it was a mixing bowl" of black and Hispanic residents, said Britt, 39, a social worker.

Fairmont residents also used the first right of purchase to partner with a development company -- KSI Services Inc. -- to secure funding for the project and a renovation that includes new, clean apartments that Britt said are a joy to live in. There are no roaches in the new place, she said, which has such amenities as a dishwasher and microwave.

"Everything was just so broken," said Britt, who lived in the old building before moving two months ago into one of the 96 newly completed units in the first phase of the renovation. The second phase, involving 109 units, will begin soon. "If we hadn't fought, we wouldn't be here," she said. "In this case, nobody was displaced."

© 2005 The Washington Post Company