

BPI PERSPECTIVE

Why Does BPI Support CHA's Transformation Plans?

by Julie Elena Brown, Adam Gross and Alex Polikoff

With planning for the "transformation" of Chicago's public housing underway, some are questioning the wisdom of tearing down existing buildings, no matter how bleak, and replacing them with mixed income communities. Why, during a severe affordable housing shortage, does BPI support a plan that reduces the number of "hard" public housing units? And why, during a market rate housing boom, are we supporting a plan that would build mixed income housing on land once reserved for housing for the poor?

In prior newsletters and elsewhere we have called this transformation of CHA's economic and racial ghettos into mixed income communities the "third wave" of Gautreaux relief. We have expressed the view, and the hope, that under the right circumstances, economically integrated communities will become racially integrated, thereby providing for those who seek it the integrated living environment intended by Gautreaux relief. But even if racial integration does not come about, mixed income communities will provide far better housing and life opportunities for Gautreaux families than the concentrated poverty enclaves they now inhabit. BPI is supporting CHA's Plan for Transformation (though not uncritically) because it will attempt to do throughout the City what already has begun, with BPI support and participation, at Henry Horner, Cabrini-Green, ABLA, Kenwood-Oakland and Madden Park-Wells. While lamentably reducing the total number of public housing units (a consequence not of city planning but of federal funding limitations), these revitalization efforts allow public housing residents to reap the benefits of improved communities. As neighborhoods historically dominated by public housing enjoy substantial infusions of public and private investment for the first time in decades, many of those who suffered the ravages of disinvestment will not be left out.

What's more, revitalization efforts expand housing choice for public housing families. In the past, public housing residents have had two choices: to accept living in a dilapidated, poorly maintained public housing apartment in an overwhelmingly poor, unsafe and racially segregated neighborhood, or to

participate in a mobility program and move elsewhere. Gautreaux relief, through both the scattered site and Gautreaux Assisted Housing programs, historically provided the latter option to thousands of CHA families. While this provided significantly improved life opportunities for the families able to participate, it came at a price—leaving familiar neighborhoods, and sacrificing valued social networks and connections to churches and other local institutions. Now the "third wave" of relief is helping to rebuild communities so that many residents seeking greater opportunities will no longer have to flee.

Thus we disagree with those who are fighting to "save" public housing by opposing the demolition of CHA's worst buildings. And we disagree with those who argue that the new communities should remain isolated enclaves of poverty, albeit spruced up, because we believe that CHA residents deserve to

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live in communities connected to, not segregated from, the rest of Chicago's residents. Though we could provide more affordable housing units by skewing the percentages in the new revitalized communities in favor of public and affordable units, doing so would scarcely make a dent in the overall need and might jeopardize the mixed income objective necessary to avoid creating low rise ghettos where the high-rises once stood.

We do however share the serious concern of those who clamor for more affordable housing. Honest disagreements over how best to create mixed income communities should not divert housing advocates from the broader goal—expanding the pitifully inadequate supply of well-located, affordable housing. The amount of money allocated each year for public and subsidized housing is shamefully inadequate. Moreover, our major cities bear a disproportionate share of the

burden to house the nation's poor. We must focus our energy on not allowing the wealthiest nation on earth, in this time of unprecedented economic prosperity, to turn its back on this moral issue.

In the years ahead, our housing work will benefit low income families in the city and throughout the Chicago region. In revitalizing areas, we will help create stronger communities for public housing residents who want to stay in their neighborhoods. New scattered site public housing units will expand choice in more neighborhoods throughout the city. (Rumors of the death of the scattered site program are greatly exaggerated—scattered site replacement housing will be an essential component of CHA's Transformation Plan.) The resumption of the Leadership Council's Gautreaux Assisted Housing Program for families displaced by the Transformation Plan, recently agreed to by CHA, will provide Section 8 families the support they need to move to better neighborhoods. And just as our Gautreaux work strives to offer public housing residents broad housing choices, our new regional affordable housing initiative will seek to expand housing options for low and moderate income people throughout the metropolitan region.



A row of townhomes—a new look for public housing in Chicago.