

How to Transform A Neighborhood

[FINAL Edition]

The Washington Post - Washington, D.C.

Date:	Apr 23, 2000
Start Page:	B.08
Section:	OP/ED
Text Word Count:	511

On April 8, Colbert King's op-ed piece, " 'Have Nots' Not Wanted," detailed "the trauma of the changes" related to the redevelopment of local neighborhoods and communities. I'd like to share with readers an initiative that speaks to the more positive aspects of what can happen when neighborhoods are revitalized.

The LeDroit Park Initiative is a strategic revitalization effort that seeks to use the redevelopment of vacant university properties as a catalyst for the enhancement of an entire neighborhood. The initiative is a partnership among Howard University, Fannie Mae, the Fannie Mae Foundation and Bell Atlantic that began with the transformation of 45 Howard-owned properties into 42 affordable single-family homes sold to university employees, municipal workers and community members. Home purchasers were provided with down payment and closing cost funds assistance by the university.

To complement the housing rehabilitation and new construction, three studies were commissioned to explore the question as to what additional neighborhood amenities were needed to add value to the community and enrich the lives of its residents: a comprehensive field study to document existing conditions and opportunities found in the 150 blocks that are included in the LeDroit Park Initiative; a plan for open space and infrastructure improvements; and a land-use plan with recommendations for economic development and expanded retail and commercial investments were undertaken.

Successful change of the magnitude envisioned by the LeDroit Park Initiative not only adds to the community's quality of life but also adds to the city's tax base as well. The city is sure to gain additional property taxes collected from once-vacant properties and new business and sales taxes that come from newly introduced commercial ventures.

Our efforts to transform LeDroit Park have been supported and positively recognized by many entities including, and most importantly, long-term residents of the community. Less well known is an important effort underway to avoid the law of unintended consequences--that is, to avoid a situation where property taxes rise so high that low-income and fixed-income elderly households and those dependent upon the existence of affordable rental units are forced out of the area.

First, the university priced half of the units below market rate to make them more affordable for modest-income families. Second, with the help of Fannie Mae, the university established an employer- assisted housing program to provide up to \$10,000 in down payment and closing cost assistance to home purchasers. Third, the university is working with area residents and two community development corporations to document any extraordinary sales activity taking place and to explore options for the creation of relief for fixed income, elderly and lower-income existing households. Fourth, the university is investigating approaches to encourage the revitalization of non-university-owned properties.

We are hopeful that the forthcoming recommendations will be favorably considered by the mayor and the D.C. Council so that the LeDroit Park Initiative continues to be an exemplary program ensuring stability for long-term residents so that they receive a full and positive return on their long-standing investment and faith in this neighborhood and Howard University.

--H. Patrick Swygert

is president of Howard University.
