

D.C. low income housing proposal—a sensible idea

WASHINGTON—The District of Columbia government has proposed—and the federal government is resisting—a low-income housing plan that makes more sense than anything I've seen in a long time.

William Raspberry

The proposal, in its-essence, is to take 56 boarded-up units of a defunct public-housing project here, partially renovate them and then sell them to public housing tenants.

The plan, if the Department of Housing and Urban Development approves it, would accomplish a number of things.

It would increase the supply of low-income housing by 56 units by returning to occupancy buildings that have been vacant for three years.

It would save the city a substantial amount of money—the difference between partial renovation (new roofs, furnaces, kitchens, bathrooms and wiring) and the cost of full-scale rehabilitation, plus the income from the projected sale price of \$15,000 a unit.

And it would recognize a fact that everybody knows but few housing authorities have been willing to act upon: that owner-occupied housing is better both for the tenants and for the community's social and environmental health than is rental housing, especially public housing.

HUD officials, incredibly, are withholding approval until local authorities prove that the more traditional approach—remodeling the properties and returning them to the public-housing pool—is unworkable.

HUD OFFICIALS, more than anyone else in the country, ought to know that the traditional approach to public housing is unworkable, almost by definition.

It begins with economic failure as the basic criterion for eligibility. Then it dumps those who meet this negative criterion into what amount to concentration camps of failure, where problems feed upon problems. Indeed, the easiest—often the only—way to lose your eligibility for public housing is to stop being a failure.

The predictable result is that the tenants, chosen initially on the basis of their negative attributes, behave negatively towards the housing, the housing authorities and themselves. The housing deteriorates, almost inevitable, to the point where it becomes unfit for habitation. Frequently, housing authorities are left with no alternative but to fix it up (and let the cycle repeat itself) or to tear it down and reduce the stock of low-income housing.

And yet the myth persists that the cure for the deterioration can be found in better architecture, tenant education and better management.

The Deanwood Gardens complex, the center of the D.C. government proposal, is not first-rate architecture, to be sure.

IT IS ALSO true that the buildings, like most public-housing projects, have been abused by their tenants. The housing authority, again typically, has not moved with alacrity to make repairs.

But it does not follow that better architecture and more responsive management would prevent the deterioration; nor is it reasonable to suppose that destroyed stair railings, broken windows, ripped out electrical wiring and gaping holes in interior walls are the result of tenant ignorance.

The culprit is the fact that tenants have no sense of a stake in the buildings they occupy and that the system is erosive of any pride the tenants might have in themselves. After all, you have to be a certified loser to be eligible in the first place.

Occasionally, a housing authority will recognize the negative results of these negative criteria and will move to do something about the situation.

Sometimes it is something as elementary as requiring tenants to make their own routine repairs (with management supplying the tools) and making failure to carry out these minimal responsibilities grounds for eviction.

Sometimes it involves such concepts as "sweat equity," permitting low-income home purchasers to substitute their own

labors for cash down payments.

And sometimes it involves what the District of Columbia has proposed for Deanwood Gardens: a plan for transforming renters into homeowners.

In each case the essential ingredient is to give occupants a way of setting themselves apart on some other basis than the fact that they are society's losers.

It all seems so obvious, and yet HUD officials want proof that giving low-income families a stake in their homes would work better than the "traditional approach."

If there is anything that requires no further proof, it is the fact that the "traditional approach" to public housing has been a loser virtually since its inception.

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Macho President . . .

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"I could take up swimming or fishing," he said. Jordan, who had returned from the Library of Congress by now, said both were unacceptable.

"When you go fishing," he said, "Amy always catches more fish than you do and you aren't exactly the Incredible Hulk in swim trunks, you know."

Touch football was ruled out because of the Kennedy's monopoly of the sport since the 1960s. Backgammon was rejected because the game requires a large degree of skill and luck. No one in the Carter Administration felt confident enough in either of those areas.

CARTER, OPTING FOR the adventurous task, suggested he become a race car driver like Paul Newman. Powell and Jordan both laughed.

Powell said, "If you use as much judgment with a race car as you did in that foot race last Saturday, Ham and I would be working for Walter Mondale."

The mention of Mondale lit a spark in the president's mind. The solution was simple, he said. He and Mondale would become a professional wrestling team and tour the country. They would take on professional wrestlers dressed in robes with current American problems emblazoned on them.

One wrestler would represent inflation. Another would represent the energy crisis.

Other topics would include the recession, government bureaucracy, environmental problems and the postal service.

CARTER THOUGHT it was a fine idea. The press could actually report that he had been wrestling with the energy crisis or inflation. The theatrics would wear off after the first matches, he said.

Aides Powell and Jordan were skeptical, but 1980 was an election year. Their man was in trouble in the polls. They needed something. Maybe this was it.

The announcement was made in the Rose Garden before the Washington press corps. Carter and Mondale were dressed in traditional Sumo wrestler gear. Carter was smiling and happy. Mondale was embarrassed and puzzled.

An ABC reporter asked the obvious question. Will such a gamble or stunt help salvage Carter's faltering election chances?

Mondale started to speak and then paused. He looked at the ridiculous outfit he had been forced to wear. Then he looked into the television cameras. Finally he spoke.

"I expect the president to be renominated and I intend to support him," Mondale said. He winked at the press and departed.

And suddenly, the famous smile that had helped elect Carter was gone and Dr. Lukash was once again administering smelting salts.

letters

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In short, I think the editorial will be viewed as constructive by those who must get elected or re-elected, but I doubt if it is very constructive on the issue of achieving a quality institution. I view the Regents' job as stating what is needed for a quality institution — I view the senators' jobs as deciding how much the taxpayers want to pay for. These are different roles, and I sincerely hope the Senators do not get mad at Regents for asking for what the Regents think is needed — nor would I want Regents to get mad at Senators for not giving all of what is requested.

That's the kind of cooperation and mutual understanding I hope will characterize the divided power over the fate of the university which exist under the Nebraskan Constitution — not complete abdication by either group to the other as

your editorial suggests.

James A. Lake, Sr.
Professor of Law

Moon Christian

In response to the "Not Christian" letter, to me Christian means follower of Christ. I believe Rev. Moon is the best example of the teaching of Jesus. I chose his church because of his teaching, and I worship God, not Rev. Moon.

To say we are "Polytheistic, Moon-centered religion" is an insult and false statement. It is a monotheistic, God-centered religion. I can stand to be called almost anything except a polytheist.

What are Keith Briggs' and Monte Froehlich's motivation for presenting such a misleading statement regarding my religious belief? Did they research the teaching objectively, or is it a gut level reaction?

John A. Rainen
Sophomore, Arts and Sciences

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