Gentrification and Fair Housing: A Local Story

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Serving Oregon and SW Washington

In 2008, FHCO launched a tour of Portland's hidden history of discrimination. The 2.5-hour coach bus trip explores a multitude of the Northwest's "equity skeletons" hiding in our communal closet, some of which pre-date the Fair Housing Act (FHA)[1]. Others are recent enough you may remember hearing of in the news.

On the tour we address inequities and injustices aimed at each protected class but this article will focus mainly on the protected classes of race, color, and national origin. Within that context a lot of different incidents and policies targeted toward a broad spectrum of ethnicities is reviewed. Among them is the public policy of urban renewal – oft referred to as "urban removal" – that has been perpetrated against a variety of groups over many decades, most notably African Americans. The devastating consequences – whether intentional or accidental – of urban renewal are not only a national trend but also a local story. It is a story that continues to affect us in terms of public policies and current neighborhood demographics to this day.

I recently reread an August 09, 2011 article in The Skanner by Lisa Loving[2]. The article does an excellent job of detailing the gentrification[3] Portlanders experienced in the 1950s and 1960s.

The article first sets the stage by illustrating how vibrant

and productive the Albina community was in the mid-50s. Due to accepted steering and redlining practices, Albina had become an openly segregated Black community. In fact, in 1950 more than half of Oregon's African American population (about 11,000) lived in two census tracts in Albina. They were concentrated into a single square mile east of the river in an area that had a density six times greater than the city as a whole. The remaining African Americans, about 2,000, were scattered in other areas around the state.

The Skanner article goes on to describe how, in three consecutive waves spanning 15-20 years, city officials developed and passed plans to bulldoze a community located in what was becoming vital land within the city center as Portland grew. The first incident demolished over 450 homes and businesses to make way for the Memorial Coliseum in 1956. The same year Portland secured federal funding to, as Lisa Loving says, "pave Interstates 5 and 99 right through hundreds of homes and storefronts, destroying more than 1,100 housing units in South Albina." Then, in '66 Portland applied for federal funds to expand Emanuel Hospital. This proposed project would flatten still more homes and businesses in the same area.

At this point Albina residents picketed, but to no avail. Demolition began in the late '60s in order to make way for the Emanuel expansion; and was soon finished. In a cruel twist of fate, the federal dollars counted on dried up within a few years and construction on the hospital expansion never came to pass. If you drive the streets of Albina today, the expansive open lots that still surround the Hospital are a result of this failed development effort. Precisely on those plots were some of the homes and businesses that were ruthlessly expelled 50 years ago.

You might wonder if this was a blighted community wrought with problems, making it a target for government-sanctioned improvements. Here's what Lisa Loving has to say about it in

the section of her article subtitled “Cause and Effect:”

> *Contrary to popular belief, ghetto neighborhoods are not a chance occurrence, nor are they the natural evolution of “old housing stock” that hasn’t been properly maintained by its owners.*
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> *In her ground-breaking study, “Bleeding Albina: A History of Community Disinvestment, 1940-2000,” Portland State Urban Studies Adjunct Professor Karen J. Gibson detailed how municipal development policies, coupled with racism in the real estate and banking industries, left Portland’s Black community segregated, ghettoized and, finally, scattered.*
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> *In cities across the nation, urban power brokers, with the help of the federal government, eagerly engaged in central-city revitalization after World War II. …“The whole transition has been racial,” Gibson told The Skanner News this week. “People paid taxes in Albina – what did they get for their taxes? …The whole thing has to do with race, and it has to do with real estate. White privilege means something – it means a difference in wealth and the fact that you could just come in and take over the boulevard,” Gibson said.*

Neither the residents nor the business owners were given time to prepare nor were they reasonably compensated. The housing stock was not replaced, nor much improved, and former residents were not provided assistance in relocating… Again, quoting The Skanner article:

> *<When the plans for> …tearing down Albina homes and businesses for Emanuel’s expansion in 1971 <was rolled out>, many local residents did not realize the plans had been laid years before, according to “History of Portland’s African American Community.”*
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> *The Emanuel Displaced Person’s Association was founded by*

> *Mrs. Leo Warren in 1970 after locals "were abruptly confronted with the expansion plans." The city required residents to move out within 90 days, offering homeowners a maximum $15,000 payment and renters a maximum $4,000.*
>
> *A much-hyped agreement signed by the hospital, the <Portland Development Commission> and the Housing Authority of Portland mandated they would use "maximum energy and enthusiasm" in replacing the lost housing… none of which happened."*

Mrs. Warren's response: "Didn't they have a long-range plan? After all, if your life's investment was smashed to splinters by a bulldozer to make room for a hospital, you could at least feel decent and perhaps tolerable about it; but to have it all done for nothing?"

The sad thing (among a number of one sad things) about this story is that it is only one example. The same thing was happening in communities all across the country – always disproportionately impacting "relatively powerless residents in central cities, whether in immigrant White ethnic, Black, or skid row neighborhoods," as PSU professor, Karen Gibson put it.

Another sad reality is that these government initiatives, along side legalized discrimination, and following in the wake of Oregon's prominent Ku Klux Klan movement (reportedly the largest Klan west of the Rockies in the 1920s) has resulted in a lack of ethnic diversity and a history of segregated neighborhoods that continues to this day. In terms of segregated neighborhoods, think of Alberta prior to market-based gentrification; think of SE Portland and Gresham today, to name just three examples. As for our relative lack of diversity, many are surprised to learn that despite the Northwest's reputation for being progressive, liberal, and welcoming, it's no accident that Oregon's history has produced among the smallest African American populations in the entire

country. According to data from the US Census Bureau, we rank 37th with a 2% Black population when the nation as a whole averages 12%. Washington state ranks only slightly better with 3.7%. One might think that with our proximity to the Pacific Ocean we would have high percentages of Asians and other immigrants. Again looking at data from the Census Bureau, the United States is made up of, on average, 22% non-Caucasians. Oregon is 12% non-Caucasian; Washington is 18%. In fact, Oregon ranks lower than the national average for each ethic group counted in the Census with the exception of indigenous populations native to America, Alaska, Hawaii and other Pacific islands. All of this helps explain why we, at the Fair Housing Council, continue to see ethnicity-based housing discrimination as the second largest area of complaints we deal with.

To expand on this historical perspective, I encourage you to check out The Skanner article[2] to learn more about this part of Oregon's history. I would also recommend reading about the discriminatory experiences of Dr. DeNorval Unthank, a noted African-American civil rights leader in Portland. If you're unfamiliar with the Dr. Unthank's all too typical story the Oregon Historical Society's site details it at http://www.ohs.org/education/oregonhistory/historical_records/dspDocument.cfm?doc_ID=b69f9218-1c23-b9d3-68aaccca8b57606b. Another, and comprehensive, read on current inequity in neighborhoods and the housing market borne out of longstanding policies and prejudice can be found in The Oregonian's summer 2012 series entitled "Locked Out" by Brad Schmidt (http://projects.oregonlive.com/housing).

As Winston Churchill once wrote, "The further back you look, the further forward you can see." Bringing history full circle to the present helps us see how our past colors our present and can influence our future.

Please consider joining us on one of our "Fasten Your Seat

Belt: It's Been A Bumpy Ride" bus tours. Many of the individuals who have participated in our tours have shared their opinions that the tour helps provide a visual connection to Portland's history. Visit www.FHCO.org/tours.htm for pricing and other details.

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This article brought to you by the Fair Housing Council; a nonprofit serving the state of Oregon and SW Washington. Learn more and / or sign up for our free, periodic newsletter at www.FHCO.org.

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[1] Federally protected classes under the Fair Housing Act include: race, color, national origin, religion, sex, familial status (children), and disability. Oregon law also protects marital status, source of income, sexual orientation, and domestic violence survivors. Washington law covers martial status, sexual orientation, and domestic violence survivors, and honorably discharged veterans / military status. Additional protected classes have been added in particular geographic areas; visit FHCO.org/mission.htm and read the section entitled "View Local Protected Classes" for more information.

[2] "Portland Gentrification: The North Williams Avenue That Was — 1956;" http://theskanner.com/article/Portland-Gentrification-The-Nort

h-Williams-Avenue-That-Was–1956-2011-08-09

[3]http://dictionary.reference.com defines gentrification as the buying and renovation of houses and stores in deteriorated urban neighborhoods by upper- or middle-income families or individuals, thus improving property values but often displacing low-income families and small businesses. Lisa Loving quotes Portland State University (PSU) professor, Karen Gibson (author of "Bleeding Albina: A History of Community Disinvestment, 1940-2000) in The Skanner article, "Luxury apartments, convention centers, sports arenas, hospitals, universities, and freeways were the land uses that reclaimed space occupied by relatively powerless residents in central cities, whether in immigrant White ethnic, Black, or skid row neighborhoods."