



A JEWEL IN THE VIOLET CROWN

A PEOPLE'S PLAN TO PRESERVE AUSTIN'S
PUBLIC HOUSING



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WE MUST KEEP THE PUBLIC IN PUBLIC HOUSING

Public housing is America's original affordable housing program. Thanks to an enterprising and energetic young Congressman from Central Texas named Lyndon Baines Johnson, Austin is privileged to be the location of the first public housing financed, built and occupied by the U.S. Housing Authority created by the 1937 Wagner Housing Act. It is a legacy of which all of Austin can be proud, particularly since all three of the city's original housing projects, Santa Rita Courts, Rosewood Courts, and Chalmers Courts, **are still in use as much-needed public housing.**

The New Deal planners that originated America's public housing program understood a fundamental reality: that the private sector has never furnished housing that is safe, decent and *truly* affordable over the long term. What was true during the Great Depression remains true now, as we face housing affordability challenges not seen since the 1930's. Public housing fulfills an important role in the affordable housing mix in most countries around the world. In most European and Asian cities, for instance, public housing constitutes a significant percentage of the entire housing stock; for example in the Netherlands nearly forty percent of the country's housing consists of publicly financed housing. Nationwide, about .8 percent of the America's housing stock consists of public housing. **Austin's conventional public housing upper-limit of 1,931 units is less than .6 percent of Austin's 2010 housing unit stock of 354,241 units.**³

ADDRESSING GENTRIFICATION REQUIRES ADDRESSING ISSUES OF HERITAGE PRESERVATION

Austin is in the midst of a severe affordable housing crisis. East Austin's 78702 zip code is one of the most gentrified zip codes in the nation.

Affordable housing and historic preservation have a long track record of working together, particularly when sustainability considerations are also factored in. Since 2000 East Austin has lost hundreds of historic buildings, traditional cultural places and other heritage sites, as rents and property values have skyrocketed. As has been amply documented by scholars at the University of Texas as well as by the City of Austin's demographer, East Austin has also experienced massive displacement of its African-American population over this time period.

Addressing gentrification in Austin will require a serious city commitment to affordable housing preservation, not only the subsidizing of the generation of more units. Doing so is also the most sustainable option: the greenest building is one that is already standing. Preservation does not just conserve what remains of the already diminished historic integrity of East Austin's unique cultural heritage, it also allows families to stay in their homes. Instead of community *placed* development by outsiders with no organic understanding of East Austin's unique culture and history, preservation done right encourages community *based* development in which the benefits of development are more broadly and equitably shared. This is the role Austin's public housing played when originally constructed during the New Deal; at a time of the worst affordable housing crisis since the Great Depression, it is a role it can play again.

WE CAN AND MUST DO THREE THINGS SIMULTANEOUSLY

- AFFORDABLE HOUSING PRESERVATION
 - PUBLIC HOUSING IS THE ONLY RENT CONTROLLED HOUSING IN AUSTIN
- HERITAGE PRESERVATION
- DRAMATIC *MEASURABLE* REDUCTIONS IN CARBON EMISSIONS

HOW?



- A Passive House upgrade at Rosewood Courts will produce dramatic energy savings of 60-90 percent over conventional code-built buildings.
- Passive House buildings are typically 2-3 times as energy efficient as LEED Platinum or Austin Energy Greenbuilding 5-star certified structures.
- The modernist architecture of the Rosewood Courts buildings ("boxy" rectangular prism shapes) makes them perfectly suited for the Passive House retrofit.
- The interior comfort of Passive House buildings is exceptional, benefiting asthma and allergy sufferers or residents with other respiratory ailments.
- Passive House affordable housing projects are already reality in cities such as Portland, and Passive House public housing projects are currently underway in the UK.
- Passive House construction will dramatically upgrade the skill level of Austin's local building trades workforce, by educating workers in some of the most important and innovative building science skills available. These skills, which can never be taken away, are in increasing demand.

REMEMBER:

Building to code is the worst possible building that you are allowed to build; Passive House is the best possible building you can build



The Orchards, a 57-unit project in the Orenco Station development in Hillsboro, Oregon. For families earning less than \$30,000 annually. Rents range from \$611 to \$733 per month. It is the nation's largest affordable housing Passive House project.



Weinberg Commons, a 50 year old brick and block three-story affordable housing project in Washington, D.C. that is Passive House certified. The apartments provide 36 affordable apartment units for low-income families including 12 homeless or formerly homeless families with below-market rents, employment services and other support for youth and families. One-third of the units are reserved for families with more intensive needs.

FROM PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION TO ACTION

Keeping the public in public housing means supporting people's plans.

The Community Development Commission should support a future resolution endorsing this plan, including its financing suggestions.

Look for this plan or a resolution based on it as an *action item* at a future Community Development Commission agenda.

