

Columbia Heights, D.C.: A Case Study of Successful Rental Housing Preservation and Tenant Ownership in the Face of Massive Redevelopment Pressures

Background & Overview

Columbia Heights is a historically African-American neighborhood in Washington, D.C. located near Howard University. The neighborhood suffered heavy damage during the 1968 riots following the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., and experienced disinvestment and population loss that lasted into the 1990s. In 1996, the District of Columbia began to implement a series of economic development projects to transform Columbia Heights, including a new subway stop. While the public investment strategies were a successful catalyst for bringing in new development and residents, the transformation of Columbia Heights led to intense displacement pressures for longtime residents. In 2012, Columbia Heights was named one of the fastest-gentrifying neighborhoods in the country, and today, the bulk of housing and other services in the neighborhood is well beyond the means of low-income residents of color.

Despite the large-scale transformation of Columbia Heights, more than 20 percent of the housing in the neighborhood has been preserved as long-term affordable rental housing, and many buildings are owned by the former tenants. The preservation of affordable housing in Columbia Heights is the result of D.C.'s progressive and aggressive tenant protection laws, robust funding, and a coordinated, high capacity network of organizers, nonprofit developers, technical assistance providers, and other stakeholders. While displacement pressure is still a very real threat in the neighborhood, the level of affordable housing preserved—in the face of such massive redevelopment pressures—is likely unprecedented in the country.

Key Strategies & Tools

1. **The Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act.** D.C.'s Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act (TOPA) gives tenants a right to purchase when landlords attempt to sell a property. TOPA has been a critical legal backstop for the city's preservation efforts, coupled with the strategies below. Many buildings purchased under TOPA become limited equity cooperatives owned by the former tenants.
2. **Major dedicated funding.** D.C. dedicates large levels of funding for affordable housing preservation and production. The district's current mayor has committed \$100 million per year to the D.C.'s Housing Production Trust Fund (HPTF)—the largest such commitment by a city in the United States.
3. **Coordinated tenant organizing & support network.** A proactive, fast-acting housing preservation network has evolved in DC since the 1970s, providing robust technical and legal assistance, tenant organizing, and coordination to preserve affordable apartments. The D.C. Preservation Network (DCPN) has become a critical forum for preservation groups to share information and resources, track at-risk buildings, and coordinate preservation efforts.

Challenges

- Preserving affordable housing for Columbia Heights' lowest-income residents has been an on-going challenge, since mitigating displacement for tenants making less than 30 percent of the median family income requires deep subsidy, as well as on-going operational subsidies.
- Some stakeholders in D.C. have argued that TOPA contains loopholes enabling tenants to drag out the TOPA process and demand payment from landlords in exchange for waiving their

purchase rights. To address these concerns, the D.C. Council recently repealed TOPA for single-family homes.

Outcomes

- 2,100+ units have been preserved as affordable housing through TOPA
- 20% of all housing units in Columbia Heights have long-term affordability covenants
- Average city investment per unit: \$86,736 (2016, average trust funds per unit)

Takeaways

1. **Incorporate residential displacement mitigation strategies into initial redevelopment plans.** In Columbia Heights, the shift from “needing to revitalize” the neighborhood to “needing to preserve affordable housing” happened very quickly. Once gentrification picks up steam, preservation efforts become much more difficult.
2. **Develop a network of high capacity preservation actors.** A coordinated infrastructure of high capacity preservation groups that can move with agility and speed is essential to preserving existing affordable rental housing.
3. **Invest in tenant organizing.** Organizing and linking tenants with a committed network of support is also crucial. Tenant voice and power is critical to well-targeted policies.
4. **Provide a legal mechanism that supports tenants’ ability to purchase their apartment complexes, including adequate notice and time to complete the purchase.** D.C.’s Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act (TOPA), by providing tenants with a right to purchase their units when sold and adequate time to complete the purchase, shifts power to tenants and provides a critical legal backstop for preventing displacement of current renters and disincentivizing inequitable redevelopment.
5. **City council and municipal leadership is critical.** Elected officials committed to affordability and mitigating displacement are critical for successful preservation of affordable housing. DC’s progressive early councils were deeply committed to affordable housing preservation, which led to TOPA, funding streams, and a deep roster of tenant support organizations.
6. **Dedicated, substantial funding is necessary.** Preservation at a scale large enough to be meaningful requires large levels of dedicated funding.