

Anacostia: The Extreme Makeover Edition

A Legislative Fix for Blighted City Properties in Ward 8

article by Christine Rushton | photos by Twyla Alston

Tucked between the homes of residents in the Anacostia Historic District sit a number of blighted, boarded up and falling apart homes. People have tagged the doors and windows with spray paint, rust and stains mar the paint along the rooflines and the most yard care each sees is an occasional mow.

No one lives in these District-owned homes and the cost to repair them would be considerable.

DC City Council Chair Phil Mendelson introduced a bill in the July that could change the fate of these houses. Bill 21-837 “The Historic Preservation of Derelict District Properties Act of 2016” aims to give four properties over to the L’Enfant Trust, a non-profit dedicated to preserving and revitalizing DC’s historic neighborhoods. The Trust would then renovate the properties and sell them to new owners as “workforce housing” —

affordable housing for people who work in the area to either buy or rent.

“The benefit is huge — these vacant and blighted properties would be rehabilitated and put back to use,” Mendelson said. “Second, the properties will be renovated or rehabilitated consistent with the standards of the Anacostia Historic District.”

Both Mendelson and Councilmember At-Large Anita Bonds supported the bill at its introduction. Councilmembers Elissa Silverman (I-At-Large), Jack Evans (D-Ward 2), Mary Choh (D-Ward 3), Brandon Todd (D-Ward 4), Kenyan McDuffie (D-Ward 5), Brianne Nadeau (D-Ward 1) and former At-Large Councilmember Vincent Orange (D) co-sponsored. The bill will now go through the review and public hearing process with the City Council.

LIVING NEXT DOOR TO SQUALOR

Twyla Alston and her husband Clarence live next door

to 1326 Valley Place SE, one of the four blighted properties listed in the Derelict Properties act. It last sold in November 2011 and remains under DC Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) management. The property is currently valued at about \$143,000, according to the DC Real Property database.

The brown, wood house has no windows; rickety wood posts prop up the porch overhang; and a rusted, leaning chain link fence separates the property line from neighboring lots.

“Our neighborhood has lost many historic structures due to neglect by absentee owners,” Twyla Alston wrote in a letter to the City Council. “The properties outlined in this legislation are owned by the District Government and currently represent an eyesore in our community that attracts trash, crime and other negative behavior.”

It’s one of about 150 DHCD-managed vacant properties or buildings in the District, about 68 of which sit in Ward 8, according to District records.

Chair Mendelson said one woman he spoke to about the derelict properties said she feared that the boarded house next door might blow over and onto hers. City workers that care for the properties had to cut another house in half because one part was falling off the back, he said.

The three other lots listed in the legislation include: 1518 W St. SE, last sold in December 2013 and currently valued at about \$149,000; 1648 U St. SE, last sold in May 2004 and currently valued at about \$172,000; and 1220 Maple View Place SE, last sold in May 2014 and currently valued at about \$198,000, according to the DC Real Property database.

“They’re vacant and they’re falling apart,” Mendelson said.

That’s where the L’Enfant Trust comes in. The non-profit created an acquisitions revolving fund from grant and donation money to rehabilitate and sell historic Anacostia houses, said Trust Executive Director Lauren McHale. The 1772 Foundation, a Rhode Island group



A rusted, stained District house at 1648 U St. SE on the proposed legislation to transfer to L’Enfant Trust.



A broken down District house at 1326 Valley Place SE on the proposed legislation. Twyla Alston lives near this home.



A blighted District house at 1220 Maple View Place SE on the proposed legislation.

dedicated to revitalizing historic areas, is the Trust's biggest donor.

"We wanted to work in a target neighborhood where rehabilitation will help revitalization," McHale said. "It was clear to us Anacostia was the place to be... It has a really special history and a lot of people don't realize what's over there."

Two other Trust projects in Anacostia cost the foundation nearly \$250,000 in rehab costs over the resale price. But the Trust doesn't want to make a profit — it wants to revive the community's history.

"They're very costly rehabs because they're so deteriorated," McHale said. "But also, you have to keep that historic integrity intact. And where you can't re-use original material, you have to replace with an in-kind material."

A WINDFALL FOR RESIDENTS AND THE DISTRICT

Every time the city boards up, cuts the grass, installs temporary stabilizing beams or cuts off a section of these houses, it costs. Depending on the project, that bill can soar to tens of thousands of dollars, Mendelson said.

Even worse, if a person gets hurt on a property because of the dangerous conditions from years of neglect, it could mean a liability suit against the District, he said.

"It would be a windfall by no longer having these negative valued properties and the costs associated with that," Mendelson said.

Handing these properties to the L'Enfant Trust gives the Trust a chance to use their own funds as a tax-exempt non-profit to rehabilitate each of the four buildings to the historic district standards in DC. Then the Trust can sell them to people who will live there and take care of the property.

Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner Charles E. Wilson (8A05) thinks the legislation is "brilliant." He represents the Anacostia neighbors in the Historic District and said he's watched the community fight for the District to fix these properties for more than 10 years.

"Just imagine getting up in the morning, going to work and seeing a

(continues on pg.39)

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DC police cadets mentor junior cadets through the DC Police Foundation's elementary school program. Photo: DC Police Foundation



DC police cadets mentor fifth-graders in the DC Police Foundation's junior cadet program. Photo: DC Police Foundation

His grandfather served as a DC police officer from 1989 to 2011, so he knows the career he intends on pursuing. He also pursues a rigorous academic and extracurricular schedule as a member of Anacostia's debate, basketball, rugby, and baseball teams.

Should he decide not to pursue the cadet program three years from now, he will still graduate with college credit and knowledge about the law. He can apply those skills to whatever career he decides upon.

But opting out isn't a likely case. "Growing up, my grandfather had a big influence on me because he was a police officer," Cannon said. "Ever since, I've wanted to be a police officer."

Cannon, the 60 other students enrolled in this year's Police Safety Academy, and at least 130 more students in the junior cadet program are a start to what Persichini and MPD hope will grow into a robust pool of cadet candidates.

EARNING FREE COLLEGE CREDIT IN HIGH SCHOOL

After nearly six years, MPD now has a pipeline of special programs running from elementary-aged to high school-aged students to give District students a jump start at a career in law enforcement.

Students in the Anacostia program will earn credits in four college-level courses toward their future degree or the MPD's cadet program through the University of the District of Columbia Community College (UDC-CC). Those four classes are spread over three years and led by Anacostia teacher Chisa Perry.

Students take courses on law, public safety, and history, among other topics, said Erin Bibo, deputy chief of college and career education at DC Public

Schools. They also get an opportunity to go on trips to the DC courts and elsewhere, and learn from guest instructors from Georgetown University, the MPD, the Department of Justice (DOJ), the FBI, and experts in fields like forensic science. "Public safety is a very broad field and a very lucrative career in the DC area," Bibo noted. "It exposes students to the breadth and depth of the opportunities in public safety in their own community."

Academy students also have access to paid summer internships through the DC Police Foundation's members, the MPD, and the DC Department of Employment Services, Bibo said. Once they graduate they can choose whether or not to enroll in the cadet program, at an average annual salary of \$30,000, while taking courses toward a 60-credit associate's degree at UDC-CC.

The MPD and the DC Police Foundation "really want to commit even more and reaffirm recruiting and hiring among DC residents," Bibo remarked. "They're wanting to remain a leader in community policing, and have a deep commitment to ... working with students interested in public safety." The program only operates at Anacostia for now, but DCPS and the MPD hope to grow it in the coming years, she added.

Persichini thinks the students pursuing public safety will find honor, reward, and satisfaction in protecting their own communities. He views the matriculation of young cadets from an elementary age as the next step in 21st-century policing. "Is it going to take time? Yes," he said. But he and the District are looking at the future of DC's police force with long-term goals in mind. "Law enforcement cannot be successful without the faith and trust of the people it serves," he said. **ER**

(continues from pg.37)

house next door; Coming home, seeing the house; Cutting your grass, sitting on the porch and seeing the house," Wilson said. "Imagine the kind of disgust that builds up over the years."

He met with the last four directors of DHCD because this is the neighborhood's number one priority, he said. But it's his opinion that the agency isn't interested in restoring the houses to their original state.

"Fixing up a house is not sexy enough for them," he said. "A house versus building a large-scale apartment unit or delivering a number of affordable housing units is not enough for them."

UNDERSTANDING DHCD'S CONCERNS

McHale said resistance to the bill comes from DHCD. She and the Trust tried to approach DHCD a few years back about partnering to fix these houses, but she said DHCD was wary of L'Enfant's lack of experience in development and rightfully so. The Trust decided to get that experience on two other Anacostia properties first and came back to DHCD for another try after successfully rehabilitating the houses.

In fact, the Office of Planning's Historic Preservation Office awarded L'Enfant Trust a preservation award in 2015 for the program it started with the two homes in Anacostia.

"We support innovative tools that could help avoid demolition of historic homes due to long-time neglect," a spokesperson for the Office of Planning said. "We also see partnerships with non-profit organizations as an effective way to support preservation."

McHale hopes this success will show DHCD that the Trust can help repair these homes.

"These properties have been sitting for so long," she said. "It's not fair to the neighbors. It's not safe."

DHCD Director Polly Donaldson said the agency prioritizes preserving affordable housing. Since Mayor Muriel Bowser took office, she said DHCD has worked to increase solicitations and get the properties fixed or developed — at least half of DHCD's vacant or blighted properties are in this stage. But giving away a property outside of this process goes against the agency's mission.

"Doing so could negatively impact our goal to preserve affordability, eliminates DC's first source and CBE priorities, and discourages the District from getting the best deal for its assets by giving them away without a competitive process," Donaldson said in a statement.

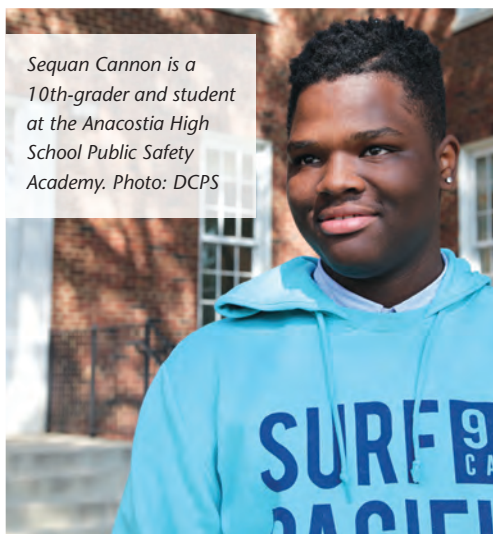
Handing the properties over to the L'Enfant Trust would do this, but Mendelson added that he thinks DHCD's worries that the District might lose out on the value of these properties isn't warranted. A resale price might not even come close to the cost to rehab each one, he said.

"These are money losers for the city," he said.

With Mendelson's support and the drafted legislation, the bill has made it to Council review. A public hearing was also set for Oct. 6. **ER**



High school graduates and police cadets participate in an outreach program for recruitment. Photo: DC Police Foundation



Sequan Cannon is a 10th-grader and student at the Anacostia High School Public Safety Academy. Photo: DCPS