

Even Poor Back Revival, Poll Finds

Most Support Redevelopment in D.C. Despite Risks of Leaving Some Behind

By *Debbi Wilgoren and Claudia Deane*

Washington Post Staff Writers

Monday, July 1, 2002; Page B01

The open-air drug markets that once dominated the concrete plazas of the Edgewood Terrace apartment complex have been replaced by playground equipment -- and children's laughter. The spruced-up high- and low-rise apartment buildings now boast child care and computer centers, a mix of subsidized and market-rate units, and a sprinkling of Asian, Latino and white faces among the predominantly black population.

On nearby streets, sagging rowhouses have been rehabilitated -- some by longtime residents, more by newcomers to the Northeast Washington neighborhood. This spring, the District's first Home Depot opened a 10-minute walk away, near Rhode Island Avenue.



Deborah Longus, a 20-year Edgewood Terrace resident, is thrilled. Never mind that rents for the market-rate units in her complex have risen as high as \$1,100 a month. Or that Longus, a caterer by training who lives on disability payments for a leg injury, doesn't know how long her three-bedroom will be covered by a federal Section 8 subsidy that dramatically reduces her rent.

"Development is good, period. We need people to be here," she said. "I don't know where I'll be living in the next 10 years, but you just can't worry about it. I'm sure they'll always have low-income places somewhere in the District."

Her views reflect those of most Washingtonians -- 55 percent -- who say that redevelopment by higher-income residents in working-class neighborhoods is mainly a good thing, according to a Washington Post poll taken in May. Two of three respondents in neighborhoods experiencing such development say the projects are mostly beneficial.

The numbers -- and follow-up interviews over the past two weeks -- create a different picture than the one often painted by critics of Mayor Anthony A. Williams (D), who talk of a city divided, in which projects dubbed "progress" do little for the poor. In developing areas, among those who make less than \$30,000 a year or whose education ended at high school, more than 50 percent called the changes beneficial.

"People want to see their neighborhoods improved. They want to see the vacant and abandoned houses fixed up," said Eric W. Price, deputy mayor for economic development. "What people talk to me about a lot is still bringing new amenities into the neighborhood."

Michelle Bailey, 27, a single mother of two who is a custodian, said, "That's real good that they're fixing up the neighborhood, because there's a lot of empty buildings." She lives in a subsidized three-bedroom apartment in Southeast, and her name is on the wait list for a subsidized townhouse nearby, in a mixed-income development built where public housing once stood.

Positive sentiments are strongest, however, among more affluent residents, homeowners and those with more education. And even those who applaud the changes wrought by Washington's building boom -- about one-third do not -- acknowledge worrying about people who new projects might leave behind.

"From a very selfish standpoint, it has greatly increased the value of our house," said Gene Martin, 65, a 31-year resident of Takoma, where residents hope that new apartment projects will draw retailers to their blighted commercial strip. "On the other hand . . . I am concerned about the reductions in affordable housing. We certainly couldn't afford to buy a house in this neighborhood now."

Nearly half of the 1,007 randomly selected adults polled in telephone interviews May 15 through 19 said their neighborhoods are experiencing significant redevelopment. The areas include gentrified enclaves such as Logan Circle, where housing prices have tripled in recent years and once-plentiful low-income housing is scarce. They also include Edgewood, Washington Highlands and many other communities that, while still struggling, have started to feel the effects of a soaring real estate market and the beginnings of a retail renaissance.

Of the 48 percent who said their neighborhoods were experiencing such development, 65 percent said it was good for them personally. Twenty-five percent said it was bad.

While mayoral critics such as D.C. Council member Kevin P. Chavous (D-Ward 7) frequently talk about poor residents being pushed out by affluent newcomers, only 13 percent of those in developing neighborhoods said they have seriously considered moving.

They include Sue Huddle, a longtime D.C. teacher whose rent for a Logan Circle English basement jumped this spring to \$1,000 from \$800.

"I'm trying so hard to stay in the District," Huddle said. "But every day's another battle." The news is not all good for the mayor, who touts economic development as one of his highest priorities and biggest accomplishments.

Advocates for the poor pointed out that the poll would not include homeless people. They said pollsters probably failed to reach non-English-speaking immigrants and others on the lowest rungs of the city's socioeconomic ladder, who may not have a working phone.

"We're seeing a tremendous increase in the number of clients who come to us because they no longer can afford their rents," said Marian Siegel, deputy director of Housing Counseling Services Inc. In Northwest, she said, there are virtually no vacancies for families looking to rent in the "truly affordable" range of \$500 to \$700 a month.

In developing neighborhoods, 1 in 4 people surveyed said the changes were a bad thing. That number climbed to 1 in 3 people among those making less than \$50,000 or with no more than a high school diploma.

"They're tearing down the low-income apartments and putting these townhouses up, and they're pushing the low-income people out of D.C.," said Thomas Mock, a landscaper for the National Park Service who lives in the District's southern tip, in a one-bedroom that goes for \$450 a month. "I would like to see them upgrade the places that's already here. Redevelop them and make them more affordable for the low-income people."

Mail carrier Darryl Thomas worries about how he'll pay the higher taxes on his LeDroit Park rowhouse, and about what will happen to renters in his neighborhood and others where housing is hot.

John Paradiso, 40, a health educator at the Whitman-Walker Clinic, dreads the arrival of tony townhouses, gleaming offices and trendy shops planned for his neighborhood near the Navy Yard on southeastern Capitol Hill. "Its just going to push the problems aside," Paradiso said.

Williams says his administration is using government bonds, tax incentives and federal grants to finance low-interest mortgages and construction or rehabilitation of thousands of low- and moderate-income rental apartments. Critics say the city is focusing too many resources on moderate earners, at the expense of the city's poorest, and is not doing enough to preserve affordable housing in the city's rapidly redeveloping areas.

But Williams insists that the city must do both.

"We have to bring back and maintain our middle class so that we can provide jobs and opportunities for our poorest citizens," he said.

Unlike many city issues, opinions about development seemed more linked to income than race. And although more whites (76 percent) than blacks (61 percent) in developing neighborhoods said the changes were beneficial, more than 70 percent of blacks whose annual household income exceeded \$50,000 felt that way. And 85 percent of homeowners supported the redevelopment in their neighborhoods, compared with 53 percent of renters, reflecting that homeowners face less risk of being outpriced.

Denise Skinner remembers her surprise the first time that a house in her Mount Pleasant neighborhood sold for \$500,000. Several similar sales followed, and Skinner's family has grown used to getting postcards and phone calls from real estate agents encouraging them to sell. But Skinner, a former child-care worker now nursing her husband through cancer, says, "We're in a nice area that we've known since we were kids. We're staying."

© 2002 The Washington Post Company