



# The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

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## New Thoughts on New Communities

By Jessica Fulton

New Communities – an eight-year old DC initiative to transform pockets of deteriorated subsidized housing into mixed-income communities without displacing residents – is not making much progress and is not living up to its promises. A [recent story in the Washington Post](#) found that the New Communities plan for Lincoln Heights has barely moved forward. At the one community that has made some progress – Northwest One – market-rate housing is being built much faster than low-cost housing.

It is becoming clear that the District needs to take a second look at how to handle this initiative. A new plan for the city's four New Communities is needed – one that is realistic and where residents have confidence that commitments to revitalize their neighborhoods will actually happen.

New Communities has produced only a fraction of the units needed to replace the subsidized housing that has been demolished or will be soon. At the Northwest One site, blocks from the U.S. Capitol and across from the new NPR headquarters, the master plan was approved in 2006. Eight years later, just 30 of 280 replacement units have been built. Another 107 units are under construction, according to the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development, but that still hardly amounts to the planned one-for-one replacement.

Yet Northwest One is the most promising New Communities project because the demand for higher-priced market-rate housing – which is needed to spur the overall development – is strong. Nearly all of the planned market-rate units at Northwest One (253 of 280) have been completed or will be soon.

If New Communities is not working well there, it raises serious questions about the work in places like Lincoln Heights in Ward 7, where the market isn't strong enough to support the needed level of development. Lincoln Heights residents were promised a new neighborhood, but it now appears that the promise was never realistic. In Barry Farm, badly needed repairs are being kept on hold because the city expects to build soon, but the experience of New Communities to date suggests that the replacement housing may take years and years to be built.

Given that the New Communities locations were chosen because they contained public housing sites that were in some of the worst conditions in the city, it seems that the District's leaders should take a hard look at other options.

Preserving affordable housing is an important goal, especially given the city's affordable housing crisis. And leveraging private dollars is a smart way to fund preservation projects. But when the market doesn't step up, DC has a responsibility to honor its commitment.

It's time for the mayor and DC Council to revisit New Communities and refashion it into a plan that works for DC residents. The District needs a new plan to revitalize public housing in these communities, one where the commitments to residents are realistic and can be achieved in a reasonable time frame.