

Tenants angry over New York Housing Authority's plans to sell to developers

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At two community meetings called by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), tenants expressed angry opposition to plans by the authority to use public property to build luxury high-rise apartment buildings.

Hundreds of residents showed up at NYCHA-sponsored meetings on March 21 in the Frederick Douglass Houses on Manhattan's Upper West Side. The meeting was so crowded that 40 people were turned away because of lack of space. The agency is seeking to lease three parking lots in the Douglass Houses to real estate developers.

In a presentation that bordered on blackmail, NYCHA Board member Margarita Lopez—a former Democratic Party City Councilwoman—maintained that the authority had no choice but to lease some of its land to private investors. If NYCHA failed to do so, she claimed, the severe shortfalls in funding would not only cause the current state of building disrepair to get worse, but also threaten the continued existence of public housing in New York City.

Lopez was echoing NYCHA's argument that the only way to deal with the authority's budget deficits was to give wealthy real estate investors the right to construct fourteen apartment buildings with 99-year leases that would, it is claimed, bring in an estimated \$30 to \$50 million a year.

Lopez dismissed the concern of tenants that the leasing of public lands would be the first step towards the dismantling of public housing. Given the reaction at the meeting, Douglass tenants clearly did not believe the official denials.

One speaker after another from the audience stated that the leasing was really just the first step towards the abolition of low-income housing in the city. Not one tenant spoke in favor of the plan.

One resident, a 77-year-old woman, told the audience that she has been going to community meetings since she was 17, and this was the worst of them all. She received loud applause when she declared, "Something is going on here and it is rotten and dangerous."

Another meeting took place on March 14 at the Washington Houses in East Harlem in Manhattan. There, NYCHA is planning to replace a parking lot, a community

center, a health care facility and a landscaped plaza in order to allow developers to create 919 apartments in an 850,000-square-foot area. Residents were skeptical when Margarita Lopez, representing NYCHA at this meeting as well, tried to convince them that construction would not bring with it a lengthy period of disruption, in addition to threatening more direct attacks on their homes and communities.

Raul Ortiz spoke for many in the audience when he said, "This is about systematic gentrification. What's the guarantee for us that this project will be it and won't continue?"

At both meetings, tenants voiced many complaints about the disrepair in their apartments and buildings. A young woman from the Washington Houses said that a fire took place in her apartment a number of years ago and that "absolutely nothing has been done" to repair it since then.

NYCHA, the city's largest landlord, has over 400,000 tenants and a backlog of approximately 350,000 repair orders. It blames this accumulation on the current deficit of \$60 million in its operating budget, along with \$6 billion in capital needs. These deficits are the result of more than \$1.5 billion in federal budget cuts for New York public housing since 2001.

NYCHA is proposing to use 14 parcels of land in eight housing campuses in Manhattan, amounting to three million square feet. They would be leased by private investors to create 4,000 to 5,000 apartments, of which 80 percent would be rented at market rates. Twenty percent would be reserved for low- and middle-income housing.

A one-bedroom apartment can easily rent for \$3,100 per month, and many are even more expensive. This is clearly out of reach for all public housing tenants. The housing authority is also looking for more sites to make available to developers for luxury housing in the other boroughs.

Housing is not the only public asset that is being surrendered to the real estate moguls. A number of libraries are to be demolished and then rebuilt on the ground floor of new high-rise apartment buildings, ostensibly to pay for the

\$230 million needed for repairs of 60 branch libraries.

The city's Educational Construction Fund is also considering allowing developers to build apartment towers on top of three public schools in Manhattan. Three such projects have taken place since 2008, but the Board of Education wants to accelerate the pace. As with the libraries, this will require shutting down the schools until construction is completed.

The WSWs spoke with public housing residents in both the Washington and Douglass Houses after the recent meetings.

Idalise Santiago, a tenant in the Frederick Douglass Houses, came to the Washington Houses meeting.

"I see it as a con job by NYCHA. They have no transparency. They are not accountable. I have a feeling the money they will get will be misused as they have with other funding they have received.

"It is just the developers' way of getting into the public housing, and it is just a matter of time before they want more land and NYCHA goes ahead and leases it.

"New York City is lacking affordable housing. They should build affordable housing. People are being priced out of their homes. You are talking about people who are not making a living wage. Our wages have not kept up with prices."

Tanisha Borden has lived in the Washington Houses for 20 years and is an employee of NYCHA. "It is not a great idea," she said about the leasing plan. "They are going to privatization and gentrification. For people who live here so many years—I have lived here since I was little—I wondered why it was being condemned back then, but now they are making it luxury housing. I suppose it is to push people out. They want to make money.

"They keep raising the rent. When I started working as a youth trainee in 1994 for the Housing Authority, my rent was \$58. Now it is \$963. And I haven't seen any improvements. I have been waiting since 2010 to get my floor fixed. They say they need to get a contractor, and then they told me they didn't have the money to pay the contractor."

Teddy Feliciano has a grandmother who has been living in the Washington Houses for 55 years. He complained that the housing authority has not modernized her apartment as it is supposed to do every 16 years. He explained that her bathtub is too low, that the home care attendant therefore has to give her a bath in the bedroom, but the authority has not updated her bathroom to solve this problem.

"We are tired of giving up public lands for market rates," he added. "The low-income people in these projects can't afford what they call affordable market rates. It is affordable only to those people who have the money that can afford it."

At the Douglass meeting, Jessie Bell explained that she has lived there for 50 years. "We moved in when I was a baby. It was so nice and clean, durable. What you did not have for your house, they made sure you had it. It was quality of life that they cared about when we started out. The management is no good now. They had money to fix up the projects in the past. They must be lying through their teeth. Where did the money go? Whose pockets did it go in? This is just an opportunity to reap from us."

Francis De La Cruz, a resident for 22 years in the Douglass Houses, was one of those who could not get into the meeting there. "My kids, who are 31 and 22 years old," he said, "are stuck in the apartment because the rents are too high. My rent went up, and I am paying close to a thousand dollars because I am working. When I moved in it was good here, but now sometimes we have no hot water.

"The government is greedy. It has changed. It is not the government that I knew when I grew up. They have to stop what they are trying to do in Washington [DC]. My daughter can't even go to college because it has to go out of my pocket. I can't afford it."

Kimberly Hall lives in the Grant public housing complex just a mile north of the Douglass Houses. "I have a leak with mold that took months to repair," she said. "The mold is still on the wall and my son has asthma. I am a nonsmoker, but living in NYCHA, I have developed bronchitis.

"I know NYCHA continues to lie. I they are saying their mandate is low-income housing, so why is the ratio of market to affordable housing 80-20? It should be more affordable housing.

"If they do it here, it is not going to stop. The luxury renters do not have to experience all the dust and the noise of the construction that we have to go through."



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