

New York City public housing tenants protest plans for luxury development

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Hundreds of tenants at a public hearing on July 24 loudly protested the plans of the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) to lease 18 parcels of land at eight Manhattan housing projects for luxury housing.

Private investors want to construct huge tower buildings containing about 4,300 luxury apartments. This is the way NYCHA intends to make up part of the huge shortfall in its budget, the result of cuts in federal funding. NYCHA claims it will raise about \$50 million a year through the leases to private developers. Federal money supplies about 80 percent of the Authority's budget, but Washington has reduced support by about \$2 billion since 2001.

The latest version of the luxury housing plan calls for investors to build a tower at the Alfred E. Smith Houses on the Lower East Side. The building—only one of those proposed in Manhattan over the next few years—would be 50 stories high, dwarfing the existing 17-story buildings that make up the Smith Houses, which were constructed 60 years ago and have a population of about 6,000 low-income New Yorkers.

A 700,000 square foot parcel of land on a parking lot would be used for this tower. In addition the agency seeks to lease land to build a 35-story building on a space now used for playing basketball. NYCHA needs the approval of the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development in order to proceed with the plan.

Even as it goes forward with plans for luxury apartments by taking areas now used by public housing, NYCHA has also sought to close down facilities because of its budget crisis. In mid-June it announced plans to close 69 community centers and 37 senior centers, while raising rents, laying off about 500 workers, continuing a hiring freeze, and possibly imposing furloughs. These cutbacks were the direct result of the federal sequester cuts in social programs that took effect earlier this year. For NYCHA this meant the loss of about \$205 million in

federal funding, or about 11 percent of its annual budget.

These announced cuts were temporarily rescinded when the administration of Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced that it had come up with \$58 million. This left \$147 million more in sequester cuts, however, so the reprieve is clearly only temporary.

NYCHA, established nearly 80 years ago in the midst of the Great Depression, provides public housing for nearly 8 percent of the city's population. The official total in the 178,000 units in the city's projects is about 400,000, but the actual number is closer to 600,000, according to many estimates. Many families live doubled up with relatives or friends because of the housing shortage.

While angry over the plans to lease out land for luxury housing, tenants also have longstanding complaints about the existing conditions in their own buildings. The official backlog of repair orders is 244,000, but a recent report in the *New York Daily News* claims that the real number is 420,000, going back four years. Whenever NYCHA attempts to contact a tenant and fails to reach them, according to this report, the problem is officially recorded as fixed. Tens of thousands of families have waited for years to have the most appalling conditions corrected in their apartments.

Despite this, the waiting list for entry into public housing now includes 227,000 applications, totaling an estimated half million people. Skyrocketing rents and the almost complete absence of affordable housing produces a situation where workers, as well as the unemployed and the disabled, are desperate to find a place to live that does not cost them \$1,500 a month or more, even in some of the city's least "desirable" neighborhoods.

This same lack of affordable housing leaves current tenants unable to leave their apartments, even if they are disgusted with conditions and would like to find larger or more modern housing. As a result, only 5,500 apartments of the total of 178,000 become available annually.

The housing shortage and broader crisis for the working population in New York is also reflected in rising rents generally. The city's Rent Guidelines Board voted in mid-June to allow landlords to increase rents by 4% for a one-year lease and 7.75% for two-year leases for all rent-stabilized apartments. This is about double what the board, whose members are appointed by the mayor, approved last year.

The number of homeless has been steadily increasing for decades. According to one recent survey, it exceeds 50,000, including 21,000 children. The number of homeless families has increased 73 percent since Bloomberg was first elected 12 years ago. There are about 3,800 homeless youth estimated to be living in the streets, susceptible to exploitation by the sex-trafficking industry.

Public housing tenants have already made known their opposition to the city's plans for luxury housing at their complexes. (See "Tenants angry over New York Housing Authority's plans to sell to developers") They have complained about the continuous noise and dust that construction would create right next to their homes. They have also expressed concern about overcrowding, the plans for gentrification that would soon entail removal of working class families from these areas, and also the threats to demolish community centers, playgrounds, parks, parking lots and health care centers.

The anger of the tenants is a far cry from the cynical claims of various Democratic Party politicians and mayoral candidates to oppose the plans for luxury housing. These politicians and those who support them, including those who helped organize the July 24 protest, have done nothing about the deteriorating conditions and the growing inequality in housing and every other sphere of social life. The fight for decent and affordable housing requires a political break from both parties of big business.

The WSWs spoke to tenants who attended the public hearing at Pace University in lower Manhattan last week.

Shirley, who lives in the Amsterdam Houses on the Upper West Side, said, "Right next to the projects where I live there is Lincoln Center and a number of high-rise apartment buildings, a college and two specialty high schools. I live in poverty surrounded by affluence. Before they put up the high-rise buildings we could see the river, and now our view is blocked.

"They are tearing down schools, closing hospitals and building high-rise buildings. Where I live families are doubled up and sometimes tripled up, in the sense that you have children, parents, and grandparents all living in

the same apartment.

"We have over 200 trees and bushes that they don't take care of. The trees have grown over the buildings so that you cannot see your neighbor's windows anymore. There is a lot of tree debris that is left there and not picked up. This is the result of job cuts among the grounds and maintenance workers.

"I have lost trust in the politicians. They just tell a big fat lie to get votes. They come around to the little people to get our votes. They come to your tenants meeting—they have their people knock on your doors. Very often, residents get hired by them just to pass out flyers on their behalf. When they get into office, their actions change. They take a curve to the other lane."

Luther Stubblefield comes from Detroit and currently lives in the Baruch Houses on the Lower East Side. He talked about the Detroit bankruptcy.

"My mother lives in Detroit and she had gas bills as high as \$1,000 a month. She had to pay \$6,000 a year in taxes. Eventually she lost her home and now she lives in an assisted living building.

"I do not believe that public housing should be used for anything other than low-income housing. A lot of people cannot afford market rates. For families with an income between \$18,000 and \$30,000 a year there is no such thing as affordable housing with market rates.

"Things are getting tougher. There are young people just out of college who have to take minimum wage jobs at fast food chains. People who make a minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour can't afford so-called affordable housing. The same is true for seniors."



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