

Destruction of Nashville, Tennessee public housing advances

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Nashville, Tennessee is experiencing a massive housing and real estate boom. As a result, the city is increasingly unaffordable for working class families. As many older, smaller homes are being torn down and replaced with homes triple in size and price, current residents of these neighborhoods are being displaced by higher property values and taxes.

Like most public housing in the United States, public housing neighborhoods in Nashville are in extreme disrepair due to a decline in funding throughout the last several decades. In a booming city like Nashville, public housing becomes an eyesore which must be removed.

As the executive director of the Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency (MDHA), Jim Harbison, told the *Tennessean* newspaper, “By the end of this year, there will not be public housing in Nashville.” Thanks to the Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) program, Harbison’s prognosis can become a reality.

Introduced by the Obama administration in 2012, RAD allows public housing authorities, like MDHA, to convert public housing properties to Section 8 rental assistance programs. This will allow the public housing authorities to take out loans on the equity of the properties, supposedly to perform much needed repairs and remodels. The public housing authorities may choose to retain ownership of the properties or transfer the properties to a private entity.

In other words, the RAD program is a deliberate vehicle for the transfer of publicly owned properties into private hands.

One such property being “revitalized” using the RAD program is the Cayce Homes in East Nashville. Located just two miles from downtown Nashville, the Cayce Homes are sitting on prime real estate. Completed in

1941, and not changed much since then, the barrack-style homes currently house around 2,000 low-income residents. The \$602 million “Envision Cayce” plan will increase the number of apartments from 968 to 2,433. This would roughly provide housing for 6,000 residents.

Although the city says the current residents will not be displaced, the new neighborhood is being billed as a “mixed income” development. The National Initiative on Mixed-Income Properties at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland concluded in an analysis of about 260 previously revitalized communities under the US Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) Hope VI program that only about 27 percent of residents returned.

A huge contributing factor to this lies in the difference between public housing and the Housing Choice Voucher Program, commonly known as Section 8. With public housing, the homes are owned by the housing authority and the rent is controlled and based on a percentage of income. Section 8 is a voucher program, where tenants pay 30 percent of their monthly income, and the voucher pays the difference up to the market rate of rent. If the rent is more than the market rate, the tenant is responsible for paying the difference. Section 8 tenants can live anywhere as long as the owner of the property accepts the vouchers.

HUD is responsible for determining the market rate for an area. According to the HUD web site, the market rate for Nashville is \$731 for an efficiency apartment, \$816 for a one-bedroom, \$1,002 for a two-bedroom, \$1,327 for a three-bedroom, and \$1,564 for a four-bedroom residence. In 2017, the average price of a one-bedroom apartment in Nashville was \$1,373.

There is no reason a private landlord would have to charge fair market rate and the landlord could easily

charge above that in a hot housing market like Nashville.

Although MHDA has not announced any plans to transfer ownership of the Cayce Homes to a private entity, a new school included in the Envision Cayce plan is an indication of how the agency will do business.

The Christian-based non-profit Martha O'Bryan Center was awarded, without formal bidding, the rights to run the Explore Charter School, which will serve the Envision Cayce area. The Martha O'Bryan Center will pay for the building through fundraising and rent payments, with plans to eventually buy back the facility from MDHA. The school is expected to cost \$25 million. However, MDHA will be on the hook if the Martha O'Bryan center cannot make payments on financing the school's construction.

The Martha O'Bryan Center created some controversy in 2016 when the *Tennessean* obtained emails from the organization's president and CEO Marsha Edwards, in which she encouraged her staff members to volunteer on the campaigns of school board candidates who were pro-charter school. Federal law prohibits non-profits from getting involved directly or indirectly in campaigns.

The Cayce Homes are in severe disrepair and desperately need to be improved for the residents. However, the best way to do this is not through privatization of public housing.

Affordable and decent housing is a basic social right, not a luxury. All people deserve safe, affordable, high-quality housing in areas close to their places of work, schools, groceries, hospitals, and other vital public infrastructure.

The only way to secure the right to housing is through the democratization and public ownership of social resources by the working class. Above all this requires the socialist reorganization of society to fulfill human need, not the interests of private profit.



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