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Top: Former tenant-association president Linda Love
Center: Baltimore Mayor Kurt Schmoke and former HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros
Bottom: HABC director Daniel P. Henson III
Photos: HABC

In Baltimore City, the lives of public housing residents and those of residents in surrounding neighborhoods are undergoing significant change. Our worst housing is being systematically transformed into some of our best. The city is reweaving its social fabric, making it stronger, more vibrant, more sustainable.

This is being accomplished with low-income public housing residents driving the thinking and working hand in hand with various private-sector players, who are typically shy of public housing. Through the federally funded HOPE VI Program (also known as the Urban Revitalization Demonstration), Baltimore's four most troubled communities—with eighteen high-rise, brick monoliths from the past—are some of the hottest development sites in the city.

All four sites are just blocks from Baltimore's world-renowned Inner Harbor. Two sites, comprising eleven high-rises, have been cleared; one (Pleasant View Gardens) has been entirely rebuilt and the other is just popping out of the ground. A third site is being readied for implosion in July and the last recently was awarded federal funding. Together, the four sites represent a half billion dollars in neighborhood revitalization.

In 1991, Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke convened a task force to recommend solutions for our troubled family high-rise communities, which were consuming enormous amounts of public resources. In July, 1993, the task force concluded (for the first time ever in Baltimore) that certain public housing developments should be demolished because it made no sense to rehabilitate them. Lafayette Courts alone was costing HABC nearly \$1 million per year in elevator repairs.

Together, the four developments represented the state's single largest concentration of poverty, with nearly 85 percent of their residents on public assistance, compared to 60 percent, on average, in the rest of the city's public housing. Average income was under \$6,000 per year, significantly lower than the average for the rest of the city. Crime was off the charts.

The four developments comprised a total of 2,551 units on 63 acres. The city's plan was not only to rebuild quality housing but also to reduce the on-site

population density dramatically by building smaller communities elsewhere. More than 1,000 units are being replaced through small, mixed-income, infill and renovation projects scattered throughout the city and many residents are opting for Section 8 vouchers.

Our relocation strategy includes several programs that help residents move to surrounding suburbs. One program, called Moving to Opportunity, will monitor the progress of 243 families for five years. Half the families are in a control group, with little social or placement assistance compared to the target group. Initial findings show that job acquisition and retention, as well as education benchmarks for children, have improved for the target group.

The thrust of the program was to make public housing safe and pleasant, and to provide opportunities for social and economic advancement. Residents of our four revitalized communities will have opportunities to become better educated on-site, access to on-site day-care and recreation services, job-search assistance, computer skills enhancement and opportunities to begin their own businesses.

As the developments are rebuilt, HABC has partnered to provide construction-training programs, such as "Step-Up," which has become a national model. Hundreds of residents work at attractive wages and side-by-side with skilled union workers in twelve skills areas, such as plumbing, carpentry and tiling.

Lafayette Courts

Designed in the 1940s and built in the early 1950s, Lafayette Courts' six high-rise towers were aimed at eliminating urban decay. Unfortunately, all of the towers were built to the absolute minimum of standards, as if public housing residents would not need air-conditioners, washers and dryers, could not afford televisions or hair dryers, or would not need more than 650 square feet of living space. Engineering reports estimated that systems upgrades would cost some \$10 million per building.

The project began declining in the 1970s, and by the mid-1980s, Lafayette Courts and its three sister devel-

opments were deemed the state's worst housing problem. By 1990, the nightly news documented all-too-regularly not only the buildings' decline but also the residents' despair. Drug dealers were so entrenched that maintenance workers took their lives in their hands when they attempted to make repairs. Machine-gun-toting drug dealers controlled the buildings, charging residents to enter their own units. During one drug raid gone bad, ten police officers were pinned down by automatic weapons fire for an entire evening until a tank was brought in from Washington, D.C., to extricate them.

Today, Pleasant View Gardens' 228 garden-style townhomes stand as some of Baltimore City's best mixed-income housing. A new day-care center, recreation center, community center and senior mid-rise buildings are interspersed with twenty-seven townhomes sold to former public housing residents. A new mini-medical center has moved in and housing for very young mothers is nearby. Working role models, not bold drug dealers, live next door.

At Lexington Terrace, ten blocks west, one-hundred homeowners will soon live at the new Townes at the Terraces. A business incubator will be housed on site, just across the street from the 26,000-employee University of Maryland Medical Systems complex. Some obvious linkages have already been established, such as on-site GED and college tutoring services and a medical transcription training program.

When the 758 units of Murphy Homes fall just a block north of the Terraces, Baltimore City will be just one development shy of a decade-long dream to eliminate its most troubled housing. Along with the vanishing bricks and mortar of the high-rises, so symbolic of failed policies of earlier years, go the stigmatized cages of despair that gave little chance for economic or personal empowerment. The social transformation may take slightly longer, but crime statistics and quality-of-life issues are underscoring this new dawn in Baltimore's public housing communities, which to many observers have disappeared through blending with the surrounding communities.

Even the crankiest critic of HUD'S HOPE VI program would be impressed by Pleasant View Gardens' attractive architecture and streetscapes. The new neighborhood boasts pattern and detail straight from the Congress for the New Urbanism canon: a central park, tree-lined streets, rear alleys and design details that reference historical row-house architecture. (No front porches, though, and no corner stores.) The success of this attention to form will largely depend on the caring it calls forth from its residents. Will this new community develop and maintain a civic infrastructure to complement its physical organization?

This project also combines many intriguing elements that point to a more comprehensive view than HUD and its public housing partners have typically demonstrated in the past. It has been conceived with attention to employment opportunities and incorporates a job-training center, health care, elderly housing and recreation. It is sited next to public schools and Baltimore's central post office, which, one hopes, would provide some residents opportunities to walk to work. Planners have long hoped to see economic development officials talking to housing authorities, though most of the promise is yet to be realized.

On the surface, we learn from Pleasant View Gardens that given enough money, about \$105 million, you can replace ugly, dysfunctional, public housing with 338 units of attractively designed public housing and related facilities. Beneath the surface, though, this project provokes two basic questions: Are we being truly comprehensive in our planning, and are we ensuring that implementation of these objectives is sustainable, both financially and physically? The specifics apply to Baltimore but the issues speak to HOPE VI projects elsewhere.

The quality of Pleasant View is a jarring contrast to the very harsh surroundings. The perimeter of the project is fenced attractively, and the sad brick-and-asphalt housing, vacant lots and abandoned commercial buildings on nearby blocks call for acknowledgment of their plight. Though it is possible to walk to adjacent facilities, the surrounding environment is not inviting enough to tempt one to do so.