

Elfreth, Cain and Henson: A plan for public housing in Annapolis

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We are appalled that anyone is forced to live this way, and we are committed to being a part of a solution that ensures safe, healthy, and dignified living conditions for the 790 families who reside in public housing in our community.

The infrastructure problems of Newtowne 20, Eastport Terrace, Harbour House, Robinwood, and the Morris H. Blum high-rise are unacceptable, yet did not occur overnight. Systemic and long-standing disregard for our neighbors who live in Housing Authority of the City of Annapolis properties — the same neighbors whose children are classmates with ours, who provide hospitality to our visitors, help run our hospitals, and care for this city's elderly — dates back to the 1950s and is a result of inequities in city, state, and federal laws and policy.

What's worse, decades of fear that this problem is seemingly too insurmountable to solve have resulted in inaction and perpetuation of the status quo. Unfortunately for too many families in our community, that status quo looks like persistent mold that has led to reports of serious respiratory conditions in children, dysfunctional plumbing that has leaked human waste into bathrooms and kitchens, evidence of rampant rodents and cockroaches, lack of air conditioning during increasingly hot summers, and air ducts crusted with years of dust and debris.

While we are not the generation that created this problem, we refuse to be the generation that allows it to continue.

We support HACA's commitment to a comprehensive redevelopment in a manner that ensures families of all income levels can continue to live in our community. We are hopeful that the upcoming redevelopment of Newtowne 20, which was driven by the leadership of former Speaker Mike Busch, will serve as a catalyst for rapid redevelopment of Morris H. Blum, Robinwood, Eastport Terrace, and Harbour House.

However, we acknowledge that such a complete redevelopment is likely a decade or more away and we cannot tolerate any neighbor of ours living in such uninhabitable conditions. The long-term goal of total redevelopment is laudable, but short- and mid-term goals are necessary to realize sustainable change.

We recently met with County Executive Steuart Pittman, Councilwoman Lisa Rodvien, and city officials to develop a shared plan. County and state officials are committed to working together to ensure our constituents live in the same conditions that we want for ourselves and our families. We are hopeful city and HACA leadership will join us in executing the following plan:

In the short-term: every unit of public housing should be inspected in the same manner as private housing within the calendar year. A comprehensive list of deferred maintenance, which currently does not exist, should be drafted from those inspections in order to bring HACA properties up to City code.

In the mid-term: an honest review of this deferred maintenance list should lead to a yet-to-be-determined budget number that the city, county, state, and federal officials will work together to fund and execute. Our community's rich and deep network of nonprofits, churches, and skilled labor - many of whom

have asked, “How can we help?” - can be invited to supplement this funding with sweat-equity and in-kind contributions.

We are also committed to reviewing state housing law that may contribute to the inequitable conditions across Maryland and exploring any necessary changes. There is no excuse — not bureaucracy or multi-jurisdictional headaches — that should prohibit us from doing the right thing. The people of Annapolis deserve nothing less.