

Washington Village residents put NHA on the hot seat

By Nancy Chapman 5 : 40 am EDT September 14 2018



Norwalk Common Council member Ernie Dumas (D-District B) sympathizes with Washington Village residents at a Thursday meeting in South Norwalk.

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NORWALK, Conn. – Jasmine Prezzie’s mother is going through a double trauma, Prezzie told Norwalk Housing Authority Commissioners Thursday.

Prezzie’s mom, a Washington Village resident, will have to move twice despite promises of an easy transition into the new Washington Village, because she didn’t win the NHA’s lottery to be first to get a new apartment next door.

“A voucher and apartment hunting is a whole different ballgame and there is no case management, I am her case management. I work 40 hours a week,” Prezzie said to NHA Executive Director Adam Bovilsky Thursday in a community meeting organized by Common Council member Ernie Dumas (D-District B).

Video by Harold Cobin at end of story

The Housing Authority, with the help of a \$30 million U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Choice Neighborhoods Initiative (CNI) grant, is building a new mixed-income apartment complex to replace Washington Village, which may be the oldest public housing complex in the United States. But things haven't gone as originally planned.

Because the Friends of Ryan Park in 2015 filed a lawsuit against the Authority and held up construction for two years, the schedule had to be accelerated because there's a deadline with CNI funds, Bovilsky said. An original plan of phased demolition was no longer possible, he said.

“One of the things that meant we had to do, just because we've got to get it done, was we could not wait to demolish the first set of buildings and put building C up without starting to demolish everything, and building everything at once,” he said. As a result, “a lot more people are going to be displaced temporarily.” Some will have to use vouchers to find housing elsewhere, instead of moving directly from an old Washington Village building into a newly constructed one, as originally planned.

The Housing Authority is absolutely going to keep its promise to Washington Village residents and give them the right of first refusal on Soundview Landing, but there are rules that have to be followed, NHA Board Chairman Cesar Ramirez said to about 30 people. He added that he's had sleepless nights because of the issue.

The Authority had to decide what would be the fairest way to choose who

moved into the new complex first and settled on a lottery, said Bovilisky, who has been NHA executive director for a few months.

Bovilisky was Norwalk Human Relations & Fair Rent Department Director before coming to the Authority. The lottery was the right decision, and he knows it was done fairly because he supervised it, he said.

There were two lotteries, one for seniors and one for families, he said.

Many of those in attendance said it wasn't fair.

“A lot of these women in here have had their apartments in good standing for 30-40 years,” Prezzie said. “Can you imagine watching your neighbor who just moved in get their new apartment, or get their new voucher, and you're still sitting there?... Who would not have thought of to move these women in here, who are more stable, versus gambling?”

Any other way of deciding who got the new apartments would have been subjective and could have been considered favoritism, Bovilisky said.

“Yes, it's a lottery, but we weren't gambling,” he said. “We decided we're not qualified to decide who deserves a unit more than someone else and that the only fair way to do it, because we didn't want to play that type of hand, was to just say, it's a lottery, whatever comes out it comes out, and that way nobody should be claiming favoritism.”

Washington Village has 136 apartments, but there are more than 136 families eligible to move into what has been dubbed Soundview Landing because some residents moved out when construction began and new residents moved in, he said.

Seven Washington Village families have moved into Soundview's Building A and 32 are going to move into Building B, he said. The priority is to get people out of the buildings that are closest to the coming demolition, and then help those in the remaining apartments find new homes.

Displaced residents receive vouchers that are unique, because they are tenant protection vouchers, NHA Choice Neighborhoods Director Tom Ivers said.

Generally, recipients of housing vouchers must stay in the community in which they are issued, but tenant protection vouchers can be used anywhere, he said.

Common Council member Travis Simms (D-District B) said that NHA is “forcing them to move out to other community because you are dangling a voucher in front of them.”

Simms, expressing sentiments that were supported by many in attendance, said Norwalk is a diverse community but NHA is approaching residents with a tone of “we just want you to leave.”

“Everyone has the right to return,” Bovilsky repeated. He explained that of the 47 vouchers that have been issued, four were used in other Fairfield County communities because recipients chose to go that route.

“I don’t feel comfortable telling somebody they have to stay in Norwalk and they have to have a choice,” he said. Bovilsky emphasized that he likes Norwalk’s diversity, too.

Ivers explained that NHA is making a concerted effort to inform residents that the vouchers can be used anywhere because that’s not generally the case.

“What I am hearing and seeing is two different things,” Simms replied. “I don’t think we should be using federal funds to force people out and then on top of that, have them move into other communities.”

Washington Village has offered 136 units for extremely low income people, but with the additional vouchers, more housing units have been added to Norwalk, Bovilsky said. He explained that if some residents have exceeded the maximum allowed public housing income levels they can use vouchers to qualify for new “affordable” Soundview Landing apartments.

Bovilsky has gone “way beyond,” Ramirez said.

“Believe me, you will be taken care of. Not everybody is moving into the first building. Everybody’s going to be moving to the new buildings,” Ramirez said.

“We believe by end of the calendar year, but hopefully sooner than that, everyone will have a voucher and be moved out on their own terms,” Bovilsky said. “I know not necessarily into Soundview Landing as we had hoped but we would love as much as possible but everyone will be taken care of.”

“Everybody should have been out before they started building,” Prezzie replied.

The financing for the project has to be done in waves, with funding established for each phase when NHA and Trinity Financial are ready to begin construction on that phase, Bovilsky said.

That’s the best way to finance the project but it creates problems for the residents because, “HUD is not going to give us temporary vouchers until we can show a need because we’re about to demolish the building,” he said.

The positive side of this is that residents are getting vouchers 1.5 years ahead of the original plan, Ivers said.

“You giving my mother a Section 8 voucher two months before her having to move is not helpful and it’s not like a gold mine because speaking for her, her plan was to move directly into Soundview,” Prezzie said.

NHA is moving 37 residents next week, so the remaining residents will have to have patience, Bovilsky said.

“So far, and fairly quickly, we have found apartments for 47 families,” Ivers said.

Bovilsky agreed to have another meeting with residents in three weeks, to continue to clarify the situation.

Among the non-residents in attendance was Diane Lauricella, who worked with the Friends of Ryan Park in 2015, fighting the NHA plan.

Lauricella, after the meeting, said she did that in opposition to people living in a flood plain, and she separated from the Friends as the court case moved along, refusing a request to speak in the trial.

“I do not believe that that the ‘two year delay’ is true,” Lauricella said. “It’s a very popular thing to say as far as the delays experienced here. I don’t think it’s two years and a lot of it was the choice of the Redevelopment Agency and the way they conducted themselves.”

The Friend’s lawsuit was filed in July 2015 and dismissed in April 2016.

“I’m going to check and see how exactly realistically how many months or years of the delay per se, but I don’t agree that it was two years,” Lauricella said. “I think that’s being used as a convenient excuse. There were decisions made all up the chain about getting a waiver from the flood zone laws that everybody else is supposed to abide by. So there were good reasons to question.”

Washington Village Project Update Meeting

