

Norwalk Housing Authority: 'We're not going to kick anybody out' of Washington Village

By Robert Koch 6:55 pm EDT, Friday, September 14, 2018



Photo: Erik Trautmann / Hearst Connecticut Media

Image 1 of 5

Employees of McCabe Moving remove belongings of some of the remaining residents at Washington Village Thursday, September 13, 2018, in Norwalk. Norwalk Housing Authority Executive Director Adam Bovilsky

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NORWALK — Washington Village resident Candida Flores has watched her neighbors move out as part of the rebuilding of the public-housing complex off Water Street in South Norwalk.

While she'll be able to return to Washington Village once it's rebuilt, finding an apartment in the interim is a problem, according to her daughter, Maria Flores.

"She's got a voucher for Section 8," said Maria Flores, standing outside her mother's apartment Thursday afternoon and referring to the federal housing choice voucher program. "So we're looking for an apartment and we don't find any apartments. That's a problem with Section 8."

The Flores were among two dozen people — largely remaining Washington Village residents — who came to the Norwalk Housing Authority Choice Neighborhoods Initiative Office at 149 Water St. Thursday evening to press officials for answers.

Many feel the walls closing in as Washington Village reconstruction moves into its second phase, the demolition of the existing buildings.

"You giving my mother a Section 8 voucher two months before her having to move is not helpful and it's not like a goldmine. Her plan was to move directly into Soundview (Landing)," said Jasmine Prezzie, referring to a newly completed building on Day Street. "She was not interested in a voucher, so a voucher and apartment hunting is a whole different ballgame."

Councilman Ernie Dumas, a District B Democrat, arranged the meeting under the title "A Call to Action..." after hearing remaining Washington Village residents share their concerns about where they stand amid the ongoing Washington Village Transformation Plan.

"Most of them have a lot of complaints," said Dumas, walking through Washington Village on Thursday afternoon. "Some of the things that they were told are not true."

The Washington Village Transformation Plan calls for razing the existing 136-unit complex and building 136 public housing units, 67 workforce housing

units and 70 market-rate units in two-, three- and four-story buildings. A new 10-unit apartment building at 13 Day St. and nearby 70-unit building at 20 Day St. recently reopened as part of the first phase of the project.

From the start, Washington Village residents “in good standing” with the Housing Authority were promised they’d be able to return. While officials stood by that promise Thursday evening, they acknowledged problems have occurred for some residents.

Of the 136 families living in Washington Village before work began, 27 are still living there, according to Adam Bovilsky, the Housing Authority’s new director. He traced the need to find interim housing for some to a lawsuit filed by The Friends of Ryan Park. The organization argued unsuccessfully in court against rebuilding the complex in a flood plain.

The lawsuit delayed the project by more than a year, forcing the Housing Authority to speed up the reconstruction schedule lest \$30 million in federal funding be lost, according to the Housing Authority.

Bovilsky, a civil rights attorney who previously worked as Norwalk’s human relations director, said a lottery was chosen to determine which residents relocated first, leaving some others with vouchers to find off-site interim housing before they can return.

“We could all argue about who should go? Should it be the people who are most frail? Should it be the people who most senior? Should it be the people who have lived there the longest?” Bovilsky said. “We decided that the fair thing to do, so we’re not playing favorites, is to do a lottery. And I’ll take pushback. I understand people aren’t happy with that — Most of people who of course can’t move right in — But that was the decision made a couple of years ago.”

Thomas Ivers, Choice Neighborhoods director at the Housing Authority, directed residents seeking interim housing to the office’s relocation

specialists. A realtor is also helping out.

“We have retained a real estate agent who is taking people around and showing them apartments,” Ivers said. “Our relocations specialists are searching for apartments every day. I see them printing out listings on the copy machine every day. ... and we will give (residents) as much time as they need. We’re not going to kick anybody out.”

Catherine Pauling isn’t among the Washington Village residents needing interim housing. On Sept. 5, she moved into her new apartment at Soundview Landing.

“It is so beautiful inside,” Pauling said Thursday as she returned to her old apartment to check for mail. “I love it and I love to decorate it, too.”