

OPINION | Doing rental right

BY BOA LEE, TC DAILY PLANET

April 28, 2010

I attended a March 23 District 7 Planning Council Community Concerns meeting and listened to neighbors discuss the latest Greater Frogtown Community Development Corp. project involving buying, rehabbing and then renting out homes in the Greater Frogtown neighborhood in St. Paul.

For more information on the Frogtown housing plan, see [Greater Frogtown CDC and Project for Pride in Living propose rental units in Frogtown](#) by Sheila Regan

Patty Lammers from the CDC was at the March 23 meeting to tell the community that the organization had received federal Housing and Urban Development dollars to proceed forward with eight properties. The CDC's next step would be to fix up the properties, hire property managers and move in families. The CDC would put together an advisory board to help guide the program since this marks the first time in its 15-year history that the organization would become landlords, Lammers said. Preserving rental is a part of the CDC's work, she added. Lammers also said that having a good balance of rental and homeowner-occupied homes in the neighborhood creates healthy communities.

District 7 hosted a meeting about the CDC's initiative late last year and the community had voted against supporting it. Many in the room at the March meeting were upset about the initiative, desiring not to see more homes in the neighborhood turn into rental. Some said they were adamantly opposed to increasing the number of rental properties, pointing to the difficulty of evicting problem tenants and the opinion that a concentration of rental properties will decrease the value of surrounding homes. Clearly, the neighbors were not saying that all tenants in Greater Frogtown are bad and the neighbors weren't making the assertion that rental properties are entirely to blame for today's decreased home values. Some were probably upset that the CDC program was advancing, despite their aired objections last year.

As I sat there, I wondered whether I would have felt comfortable as a tenant sitting in that meeting. My family and I rented two homes in Frogtown beginning a decade ago - first in the 700 block of Minnehaha Avenue West and, later, the 600 block of Blair Avenue.

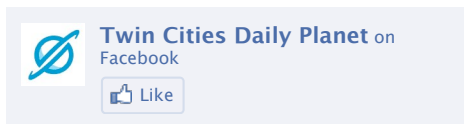
My family was poor. After a few years on welfare and living in public housing, we decided no more; we were committed to doing it on our own. To support my mother, me and my four younger brothers, my father got a job as a janitor making just a few cents more than minimum wage. We simply could not afford to live in anything bigger or fancier than those homes on Minnehaha and Blair avenues. Further, my grandfather - who then and still today lives with my two aunts in an owner-occupied home in the 300 block of Sherburne Avenue - has lived in Frogtown nearly all of our children's lives. My father wanted to be near him. Our family history had blossomed in Frogtown.

One evening, I opened the basement door at the home on Minnehaha Avenue to find a rat the size of a feral cat sitting on the bottom stair. Wielding a broom in her hand, my mother chased it back down the sewer. When we lived on Blair Avenue, there would often be a mouse or two sitting comfortably next to me as I watched television. Then 20 other mice would scurry across the floor. At night, we went to sleep to the clap-clap-clap sound of mouse traps going off every few minutes. The health department told us they'd have to condemn the structure; the infestation of mice was just too overwhelming.

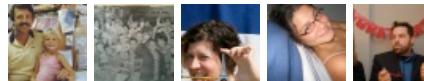
We did not take a roof over our head for granted. We took care of the lawn. My brothers would take turns mowing the small lot. My mother had a vegetable and herb garden in the backyard that she tended to. Our home on Minnehaha Avenue was flanked on both sides by owner-occupied homes and we were lucky that neither neighbor ever blamed our living there as reason why their home's property value went down. Instead, they greeted us. My brother smoked cigarettes with one neighbor and spent lazy summer afternoons chatting about cars with the gentleman.

If this CDC program is going to happen anyway and if bad renters and absentee landlords have consistently been a problem for Frogtown, marring neighbors' opinions about renters, then the neighborhood is being given a chance now to have a say in how rental properties should be run and maintained and how they expect the tenants to behave. Neighbors should also help set the standard for what kinds of conditions a family should live in. No family deserves to live in an unhealthy home. The community has to be able to point to good models of being a responsible landlord.

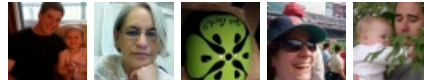
Neighbors can enforce accountability. The owner of the homes - the CDC - is officed in the neighborhood and neighbors know who to get a hold of when problems arise. This is vastly different from most scenarios in which



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landlords never even bother to post their name and phone number on the house as is required - let alone visit the properties regularly.

Instead of empty, foreclosed homes dotting Frogtown or homes like the ones in which my family and I once lived, the CDC program will rehab houses and get families in them. I hope Frogtown neighbors will welcome all neighbors - even if they are just renters. Let us not discriminate because someone cannot afford to own a home. Let us put ourselves in their shoes and imagine where they might've come from and what conditions they were forced to live in. See this as an opportunity to take a stand and help out someone else.

Is this program really that bad for Frogtown? Is rental better than having a vacant house next door? Do families who cannot afford to buy a home now still deserve decent living conditions as renters? If our experiences with rental properties have been poor, what actions can we take to hold landlords more accountable? Are we able to see this as an opportunity, or will we continue to see ourselves as victims of a program we might not have advocated for? Is there really ever a way to control who moves in on our block and how they behave? How can we begin having those conversations? Am I, my family and others who rented or do rent in Frogtown really to blame for the majority of the community's ills? Improving our community demands that we open our eyes and our hearts.

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Boa Lee

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Submitted by Tait Danielson-Castillo (not verified) on Thu, 2010-04-29 19:43.

Thank you Boa. As a former employee of the District 7 Planning Council and a former resident of Frogtown, you have a unique perspective on this issue and community meetings.

First, I'll add that the problems that residents have with the Greater Frogtown Community Development Corp. rental proposal has less to do with having more rental (District 7 currently has 60% rental & 40% home ownership - after all these foreclosures, who knows) and more to do with the fact that the GFCD has never been a property manager before and has yet to explain their long-term financial capacity.

Second, your editorial would be more interesting if you took out the word "Frogtown" and replaced it with "Highland".

A plea for more affordable rental housing citywide is a discussion worth having. Discussing how we create more rentals in Frogtown is just a history lesson.

Thanks again. As always, your passion for community resonates in your deeds.

Tait A. Danielson Castillo, Director, District 7 Planning Council

[reply](#)

[Rental](#)

Submitted by James P Berka (not verified) on Wed, 2010-05-05 22:01.

Thank you for your article. It was interesting and informative. My wife and I started out living in a duplex in the 700 block of Van Buren Ave when my wife was still in school. It was a blessing as it gave us an opportunity to live near her school while also giving us an opportunity to meet people and have experiences that we would never have had in a more "gentrified" environment. Today, we are home owners on the North End and my wife has finished school and is an attorney. In all honesty, when we left the Frogtown neighborhood, some of our neighbors told us they wished we would stay. I know we were good tenants. All the same, I also know why there is fear in the idea of living next door to rental property. It is a fear of the unknown and a fear in knowing that neighbors could change from year to year and be unpredictable. I live next door to a rental home now and it has had 3 tenants in 3 years. Still, I have enjoyed them all for the most part, and I am glad that people who need a decent home can find one. I hope that the CDC can help people to get past their fears in rental housing.

Sincerely,

James P Berka

[reply](#)
