

NEWS

Annapolis City Council repeals racially exclusionary urban renewal code section in return from August recess

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In its return from August recess, the Annapolis City Council repealed a City Code section that a half-century ago had established a racially exclusionary housing development practice in certain parts of the city.

Alderwoman Elly Tierney, D-Ward 1, sponsored the ordinance, [O-13-21](#), which passed by a final vote of 8-1. It eliminated all provisions related to urban renewal, a federal program that funded the large-scale redevelopment of neighborhoods deemed to be deteriorated or run down. The policy resulted in dozens of Annapolis families, many of whom were Black, being displaced.

Tierney said she sponsored the bill as a “first step in atonement” for forcibly removing dozens of families from their homes, a move the city has never fully recovered from.

“It destroyed our social fabric as a community,” she said. “We created a city where the citizens that were removed to the outside were detached and felt alienated and we have never been able to figure out how to give the city back to those residents.”

In Annapolis in the mid-1960s, urban renewal forced residents to leave certain parts of the Historic District, such as along Pinkney Street, and led to the partial leveling of the Old Fourth Ward, a predominantly Black and Jewish neighborhood, home to about 3,000 people that featured numerous Black-owned businesses.

Thirty-three properties in the Old Fourth Ward of Annapolis were transferred to Anne Arundel County for an employee parking garage.

Their homes and businesses were purchased or taken through eminent domain by a municipal redevelopment authority, torn down and reconveyed to certain developers. Many were razed and replaced by a parking garage for county employees. It was named for John Whitmore, the first chairman of the Anne Arundel County Council under charter government and a white man.

The residents were scattered to public housing communities at the outer edges of the city, places like Newtowne 20, Robinwood and Eastport Terrace and Harbor House. Decades later, some of those same families remain in public housing.

Two amendments sponsored Alderwoman Sheila Finlayson, D-Ward 4, to remove any mention of the word “slum” from the code both passed. Areas being defined as slums or blighted were two ways in which officials determined whether properties could be torn down.

A word with such a negative connotation should not be a part of the city’s laws, she said.

Alderman DaJuan Gay, D-Ward 6, was the lone council member to vote no on the measure, which he called “lip service.”

There should have been additional steps accompanying the repeal, Gay said, such as contributing funds to the city’s Affordable Housing Trust fund to help the displaced residents get out of public housing.

“There are things that could be done starting with demolishing that garage and giving that land back to the individual families that they robbed it from,” he said.

Removing the outdated code language is well-intentioned but more must be done to acknowledge the wrongs of urban renewal, said Janice Hayes-Williams, an Annapolis historian whose family was displaced by the program.

“The city should apologize for Negro Removal,” said Williams, using the term popularized by American novelist and activist James Baldwin to describe the program’s true intent. “What does it really do (to repeal the code) for the people who were affected by it?”

Tierney said a formal apology could come in a separate resolution. She has formalized such apologies before, including in June 2018 when she co-sponsored a resolution with Alderwoman Rhonda Pindell-Charles, D-Ward 3, to [apologize for the lynchings of Black men](#) and other racial injustices throughout the city’s history.

City and county officials have taken other steps to recognize the city’s past indiscretions. In July 2020, the park along Calvert Street that abuts Whitmore Garage was [renamed “The People’s Park” in a dedication ceremony](#). Hayes-Williams was credited with bringing about the renaming.

New bills, Hispanic outreach funding

One of two bills introduced Monday, was ordinance O-35-21, which would allow the use of digital or electronic signatures for some official city documents. The bill is meant to prepare

the city for its transition from the aging eTrakit system to the new EnerGov system for processing licenses and permits later this year.

The other was R-26-21 in support of the final report drafted by the Annapolis Maritime Task Force earlier this year, which [lays out a strategy for reforming the city's maritime zones](#).

The council approved the allocation of a \$100,000 grant from the Maryland Health Department to continue funding the mayor's Take Care Annapolis program, a health equity program launched last summer to conduct outreach in the Hispanic and Black communities in the city.

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