Cynthia Fikes stands with her son in front of the Alta Wilde Lake apartments in Columbia, Maryland, which turns 50 this week.

A Suburb Designed to End Redlining Is Fighting Luxury Condofication

The ultimate hippie baby boomer 'burb is getting old, rich and feisty.

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PUBLISHED ON
Jun 19, 2017

In 1974, Cynthia Fikes' father accepted an engineering job in Baltimore's northern suburbs. The family relocated from San Diego, but her mother, who grew up in Norfolk, had no interest in settling in Baltimore, then a fading shipyard town. So the family ended up on the opposite side of the city's beltway, in Columbia. Less than a decade old, developer James Rouse's master-planned Valhalla was still a media curiosity — a place that claimed to be the integrated, mixed-income, sprawl-lite suburb of the future.

For the Fikeses, it was a place where an African-American family could buy a house without garnering a second glance, something that the Rouse Company had meticulously engineered in a marked contrast to the redlining and blockbusting tactics of the day.

Fikes lived in Atlanta as an adult, but in 2013, when it came time to raise her own son, she returned to Maryland. A few days per week, she commutes to a job as a program manager for AT&T in Tysons Corner, Virginia, a sprawling complex of office parks and shopping malls on D.C.'s fringe. Tysons is now connected to the D.C. Metro, but in her housing search, Fikes dismissed subway-accessible hubs just outside Washington like Bethesda, Maryland, and Alexandria, Virginia, as too urban. And while she would fit right in among the black middle-class homeowners in Prince George's County, the most affluent majority-black county in the United States, she ultimately settled on Columbia for the top-notch schools, easy access to open space for her son to play football and baseball, and the suburb's baked-in diversity. She fondly recalls her own childhood growing up around people of different backgrounds — like the guy down the street who fixed up old Mustangs.

"People talk about it like it's a utopia — we're integrated and it's perfect," Fikes told me this spring. That sentiment is an overstatement, but "it's way better. I wouldn't have moved my son here if I didn't think it was better," Fikes said. "If Columbia never changed, I'd be fine."

But as the unincorporated community of 103,000 turns 50 this week, the poster child of the post-war New Town movement is in fact changing, and changing more profoundly than it has since I grew up there a decade after Fikes. More than $2 billion in new construction is headed to downtown Columbia with the intent of urbanizing what is now a tree-shaded parkway bordered by a few public attractions, including the community's large eponymous mall, a man-made lake with a well-maintained green lawn and a few restaurants, and plenty of surface parking. Already, a few glassy towers have shot up and a Whole Foods opened right next to the lakefront in 2014, not far from new luxury townhouses and apartments. The investment hasn't gone unnoticed; last year, Money ranked Columbia No. 1 on its "Best Places to Live" list, lauding excellent schools and the perks of a planned community. A few months later, 2015 Census Bureau data came out ranking Howard County the **fourth-richest county in the U.S.**, with a median household income of $110,224. That same year, Columbia's rents climbed 5.5 percent, making it the fastest-growing rental market in the Baltimore-Washington corridor, and the first apartment building built as part of the new downtown plan, the 6-story Metropolitan, began renting one-bedrooms that start at $1,500 with some three-bedrooms topping out at nearly $4,000. Those rents are higher than the average in Anaheim, Chicago, Denver and Minneapolis, not to mention nearby Baltimore. More development, and likely a lot of it, is on the way.

Columbia's first Whole Foods occupies an early Frank Gehry building.

I met Fikes a mile away from downtown at a cluster of stores that anchor the village of Wilde Lake. Columbia has nine such sections, each with its own small shopping center, dubbed as village centers by Rouse and his idealistic planners. In Wilde Lake a pair of squat, 2-story retail strips, home to a barbershop, fishmonger, deli, pizzeria, karate studio and kabob restaurant, face each other along a courtyard filled with trees and concrete planters. They look about the same as they have since I biked over to this end of Columbia for tennis lessons in the ’90s.

Across the parking lot, a natural food store’s formerly crunchy, co-op feel has transformed into a shiny indie competitor to Whole Foods. As we chat in the courtyard on an unseasonably warm spring day, a sign of Columbia’s ongoing transformation looms over Fikes’ shoulder: a sleek 5-story apartment building, sporting earth tones and balconies far fancier than the garden apartments that make up most of the community’s rentals. Alta Wilde Lake’s website bills itself as home to “luxurious apartments” and boasts an outdoor pool with sundeck and a 4,000-square-foot fitness center “that makes a gym membership obsolete.”

It’s an offer anathema to the one made by Rouse when he advertised Columbia as “the next America” 50 years ago. The indoor pool around the corner, where I attended countless birthday parties, and a kid-friendly gym just one mile away, where I started working out in high school, were sold as public amenities, available for all. A subsidized membership came with a Columbia address, for any resident who chose to pay a fee and opt in. It still does today, and low-income residents can receive a 50 percent discount. The most affordable unit at Alta Wilde Lake, meanwhile, is a 688-square-feet one-bedroom that costs $1,690 per month to rent. The gym is only open to residents.

While many longtime locals are proud of the new Columbia, others wonder what it portends for the plan they bought into when they moved to the 32-square-mile experiment in suburbia. In 2016, the question came to a head when the county was forced to choose between two visions for its future — one backed by a progressive councilwoman, the other by downtown's chief landowner and developer, Howard Hughes Corporation, and the Republican county executive.

The debate forced a reckoning in Columbia about where the community sits a half-century from its founding. It stands out for having achieved and maintained a racial and ethnic diversity that remains elusive for much of the U.S., but there is no guarantee that diversity will continue or that Rouse's vision will remain relevant as new residents move in, drawn by a different sales pitch.

FROZEN IN TIME

There's no question downtown Columbia needs a facelift. When I first encountered glowing descriptions of my hometown in an undergraduate urban planning course, I wondered if the author was referring to the same town. A 2003 description of Columbia as "an enormous office park; it may be the blandest-looking social experiment since the Soviets tried their hand at public housing" felt more accurate.

Growing up in the '90s and early 2000s, my family drove everywhere, even to the village center, imagined in Rouse's master plan as an antidote to car dependence. Shopping meant a trip to the chain stores at the mall, another amenity intended to recreate a small town Main Street. Worse was a trip to the Best Buys and BJ's Wholesale Clubs that clustered in East Columbia when the Rouse Company, hard up for cash, sold land to eager big box developers in the 1980s. Near my house, I remember one independent coffee shop. There was no public transit to reach Baltimore or Washington, so when I got my driver's license, I took off every weekend to wander neighborhoods like Fells Point in Baltimore and Dupont Circle in D.C. for a taste of the city. My parents commuted hours every day on the loops of highway winding around Columbia's tree-lined subdivisions.

"They froze themselves in time," urbanist Chris Leinberger says of Columbia. As chair of the Center for Real Estate and Urban Analysis at George Washington University, he's an evangelist for what he refers to as "walkable urban places." By his estimation, the constellation surrounding D.C. is already home to 25 such alternatives to traditional suburban sprawl, which means Columbia, once cutting-edge, is now behind the curve.

Gallery: Building Columbia

The Mall in Columbia seen around the 1980s (Credit: Columbia Association)

While Rouse had always envisioned a real downtown — the town's initial lookbook includes images of Italian sidewalk cafes and Copenhagen's Tivoli Gardens — an economic downturn in the 1970s slowed that portion of the Columbia master plan. The developer would go on to father the festival marketplace trend that through the '70s and '80s transformed ailing historic urban areas like Baltimore's Inner Harbor, New York's South Street Seaport and Boston's Faneuil Hall into walkable shopping destinations palatable for suburbanites, yet Columbia's downtown never caught up before the Rouse Company sputtered and was acquired by mall developer General Growth Properties in 2004.

Around that time, civic leaders banded together to formulate a vision for downtown Columbia. They knew they had to catch up. By the time a master plan was adopted in 2010, GGP had gone through a bankruptcy proceeding and spun Howard Hughes, which Rouse had acquired in the 1990s, into a separate company. Today, Howard Hughes is the majority landowner downtown and the recipient of $90 million in public financing for the makeover. Over the next 25 years, that $90 million is expected to drive 13 million square feet of mixed-use development including some 4.3 million square feet of office space and 1.25 million square feet of street-level retail. New residents will occupy 5,500 apartments and visitors will stay in 640 new hotel rooms. Buildings will rise in some places to 20 stories, double the height of the handful of charmless corporate office towers already downtown.

A new crosstown bike route, already partly in place, will improve upon the bike paths that currently connect residential culs-de-sac to secluded playgrounds. A bike-share system is on its way, as is a circulator bus. While new parking garages currently greet visitors from downtown's southern edge, the hope is that once parked, visitors and residents will leave their cars to travel around the downtown, which runs about a mile end to end. There is also room in the master plan for a transit center and Howard County appears close to agreeing on a bus rapid transit line that would pass through Columbia on its way to the D.C. Metro.

Adding to the excitement downtown is a $50 million renovation of Merriweather Post Pavilion, a Frank Gehry-designed outdoor concert pavilion that brings tens of thousands of visitors from across the region each year, most of whom tend to drive straight off the highway into the concert venue's vast parking lot and right back out again after the show. If downtown Columbia lives up to its promised vision, there will be something to keep them in town — a place to grab a bite, an art gallery to check out or even another show at one of downtown's new bars, says Ian Kennedy, who has proudly resided in Columbia since the age of 15 and now serves as the executive director of the Downtown Columbia Arts and Cultural Commission, the nonprofit that runs Merriweather Post.

If Howard Hughes gets its way, the future will bring a far more robust foodie scene too, with mall food court staples and chain restaurants like Applebee's traded out for hip eateries like those seen in gentrified parts of Baltimore and D.C.

And those attractions will also serve thousands of new residents and downtown employees, not to mention the 100,000 people who already live in Columbia.

Children play in a fountain along man-made Lake Kittamaqundi in downtown Columbia, which will soon see an influx of new residents.

The seeds of transformation have already been laid. When Kennedy needs the occasional scissors put to his shaggy California surfer hairstyle, he bikes from his office at Merriweather to a retro-hip barbershop on the first floor of the Metropolitan. Two other high-end apartment complexes are springing up next door with more small businesses expected for the ground levels. "We're past the point where you have one person [Rouse] who defines this place," Kennedy told me on a tour of the pavilion. With his longish hair, calf-high Baltimore Orioles socks, baggy shorts and Howard County Open Streets T-shirt, the father of two epitomizes the youthful vigor that might lurch downtown Columbia out of its suburban shopping mall doldrums.

Not that the mall is going anywhere soon.

While enclosed malls like downtown Columbia's vintage 1971 model are on the wane nationally, there are no plans to close the downtown centerpiece. In recent years, GGP has instead modernized the mall by building around it, with a massive AMC movie theater and colossal family restaurants like P.F. Chang's and Maggiano's Little Italy fanning out around the complex and its sea of surface parking. At one entrance, shoppers walking from their cars into the mall have the option to stop and enjoy a kid-friendly plaza and a pedestrian walkway lined with shops, including a few local businesses and upscale specialty retailers such as Anthropologie. "The Mall in Columbia has been very successful," GGP Senior Vice President Kevin Berry says. "We're not talking about a property that is obsolete."

Leinberger, who was recently featured on NPR predicting the end of malls, is less sure the Mall in Columbia will survive; it currently has a handful of vacancies, and anchor tenants like Sears are downsizing while JCPenney is teetering.

When I walked through it on a recent afternoon, a timeline commemorating Columbia's 50th birthday was on display. The timeline started with archival photos showing the early years and ended at 2017, with architectural renderings of an alternate present day. The renderings depicted people congregating on what looked like a street in front of a brand-new building, not wandering under the mall's pyramid skylights.

"I believe GGP wants to evolve," Leinberger says. "The issue is whether Wall Street will let them."

Other publicly traded companies, Leinberger says, have faced resistance from shareholders when they try to veer from the tried-and-true path of traditional shopping centers. The whims of Wall Street are a possible sticking point for the downtown plan, as GGP will eventually have to sign off on Howard Hughes' efforts to build up the mall's acres of surface parking lots. Though there is a developers' agreement, certain practical details haven't yet been resolved.

But the biggest question mark is how to wean Columbia from the car dependence that makes those lots necessary. Far from any of the region's subways or rail lines, Columbia is effectively marooned, a condition that former Maryland governor and smart growth guru Parris Glendening likened to "an infected Achilles' heel." A new bike-share system and more connectivity is a great start but not a solution. The bus rapid transit stop under negotiation will be a major step forward if it comes to fruition, but far more infrastructure is needed if Columbia is serious about shedding its 20th-century identity.

OPPORTUNITY FOR PRESIDENT AND JANITOR

In a 1965 speech, Rouse laid out an idealistic vision of socioeconomic diversity. "[Columbia] will provide a housing opportunity for anyone who works there, from the company janitor to the company president, and at rents and prices that they can afford to pay," he said, setting a 10 percent benchmark for low- and moderate-income housing.

Longtime Columbians clung to Rouse's vision last year in July as a pair of competing bills came before the Howard County Council to improve the downtown plan, approved in 2010. The biggest question mark was around the plan's approach to providing affordable housing through a trust fund paid into by developers.

One replacement proposal called for applying the county's existing 15 percent inclusionary zoning provision to downtown Columbia, which would have yielded 825 permanently affordable units integrated through the development. The other offered a deal brokered by the housing corporation, county officials and Howard Hughes to use low-income housing tax credits, Section 8 vouchers and employer subsidies for a mix of permanently affordable units and others leased as such for 40 years. It figured 900 units, an addition to the 5,500 market-rate units already allowed under the master plan.

When the bills came up for public comment, respondents harped on a number of issues in the brokered housing plan, from increased density to reduced parking requirements to concerns about concentration of poverty. The inclusionary zoning proposal, the so-called Terrasa plan, a reference to the county councilor who proposed it, was the clear crowd favorite, with many making paeans to Rouse as they voiced their support. "We moved to Columbia in 1970 because we loved Jim Rouse's dream for this city," read a typical response. "Keep Jim Rouse's Vision alive!" implored the subject line of another.

A few commenters appended a missive by former Howard County Executive Liz Bobo, who penned a heartfelt reflection that quoted Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh and invoked Rouse's CEO and janitor dictum before concluding, "Our main concern is that we not become an exclusive community. [...] Now we are in danger of losing that quality and moving further and further from his values."

In the end, the Terrasa plan never came to a vote. The competing plan, favored by Howard County Executive Allan Kittleman, prevailed in a November council meeting.

Kittleman, who submitted the lone written commentary on behalf of the winning plan, told me in April that the end result was "the best plan for going forward because of the consensus that was brought about by all groups" including "people who are very well respected in affordable housing." He insisted, "People are going to find over time that this was the best way to guarantee that we'd have affordable housing in downtown."

Roy Appletree, an affordable housing expert who resigned from the Downtown Columbia Housing Corporation in protest over the winning plan, is more skeptical. "Downtown has a decent affordable housing plan when viewed in the abstract," he says. "When viewed in the context of required rezoning and a chance to be creative in terms of sound housing policy, it fails the test."

Nearly every Columbia resident uneasy with the direction the town is taking invokes Rouse, the enlightened developer. Howard Hughes, in turn, maintains it is stewarding the Rouse legacy. "We're building on this really amazing tradition from Jim Rouse," says Greg Fitchitt, who oversees Columbia development for the Dallas-based corporation.

Fitchitt, who moved his family to Howard County for the job and is quick to establish local bona fides like the Columbia 5K he ran the weekend before we met, can easily espouse Rouse's founding principles for the town off the top of his head: respect the land, build a city — not just a better suburb — and enable people to grow to their full potential. But he's careful to underline one point in particular. "The fourth goal, which some people often forget, was to make a profit," he says.

That attitude gets at the core of what Fikes called "a diversion in opinions about what [Rouse's] vision was." Rouse ultimately moved his personal home and his company headquarters to Columbia, the kind of skin in the game that's hard to match. With Columbia now one among many of a national portfolio, however, some residents feel slighted by the town's new master developer. "You're going to get your money and you're going back to Dallas," Fikes says.

Fitchitt pushed back at this characterization, pointing to the community benefits agreement that GGP agreed to back when the downtown plan was approved, which Howard Hughes inherited. The company is pumping millions into the Merriweather renovation, transportation improvements like the paths and circulator, the proposed transit center, and a new pedestrian and bike bridge over the highway that cleaves Columbia in two. It has also seeded and provided meeting space to new nonprofits like the Downtown Columbia Arts and Culture Commission, Downtown Columbia Partnership and Downtown Columbia Housing Corporation, though in exchange the company also sits on the board of these entities.

"Having your headquarters elsewhere doesn't mean you can't be a good corporate citizen," Fitchitt says.

RARE ALCHEMY

Ernesto Diaz is the principal of Stevens Forest Elementary school in Oakland Mills, one of Columbia's villages. He doubts that many of the parents he sees dropping off their kids in the morning know of Columbia's idealistic founding concept. For them, the town is a safe place to live with great schools, good apartments and impressive amenities like parks and pools — an important perk for a school community where two-thirds of students qualify for free or reduced lunch. For a family of two in Maryland, that means making no more than $29,637. "We have families that are really struggling," he says. "Very few of my parents are white collar."

But their kids are getting a solid education in one of the nation's best public school systems. Diaz's school boasts a psychologist, a counselor, two staff dedicated to professional learning, two reading specialists, a reading recovery teacher, multiple para-educators and special educators, a behavioral therapist, and an alternative education teacher. Many of those are full-time, as are two "achievement liaisons," who are focused on ensuring that Hispanic and black students receive the tools for success. "We're blessed," Diaz says, especially compared to what those parents could get at a public school in Baltimore City or another cheaper place to live.

But those benefits come at a cost. The average rent in Columbia is around $1,500. That would eat up nearly half the earnings of a family earning two minimum wage salaries. For families with a federal housing assistance voucher, the maximum rent covered for a two-bedroom apartment and utilities is $1,713. In May, the search engine on real estate website Zillow showed 46 two-bedroom apartments below that price threshold, out of 64 total two-bedroom listings. **According to clearinghouse website Affordable Housing Online**, Columbia has 1,277 apartments considered affordable at market rate.

az stands in the hallway of Stevens Forest
y school.

There are another 1,301 subsidized apartments in Howard County, with 92 percent of them in Columbia, but the Howard County Housing Commission's waitlist has been closed since July 2012 with no projected reopening date. The Commission declined to comment for this story, but referred me to a 2014 rental survey commissioned by the county. It cited "the large number of households currently subscribed to the waiting list" as "one indicator of this undersupply [of affordable housing]."

In Columbia's early days, prospective buyers camped out overnight for a chance at townhomes purposefully sold at a reduced price to attract low-income families. For those unable to afford a down payment, the Columbia Interfaith Housing Corporation (now the Heritage Housing Partners Corporation) broke ground on subsidized apartments, but by the late 1980s it managed less than 500 units. In "Better Places, Better Lives," Rouse biographer Josh Olsen concluded, "Rouse's staff struggled to find a way to make low-income housing possible." Part of the challenge was that once middle-class homeowners settled in, they balked at the inclusion of low-income housing in their neighborhood. In "Suburban Alchemy," a study of three 1960s "new towns," Nicholas Bloom cites letters to the local newspaper complaining about the "Rouse Memorial Ghetto" and summarizes social science research on Columbia's housing experiments, which were criticized for building subsidized apartment complexes on isolated plots, not sprinkled among market-rate buildings. He notes, "Residents had a much higher enthusiasm for racial integration than for economic integration."

Some of that attitude persists today, especially toward areas like Oakland Mills, where Ian Kennedy and his family bought their first home because it was affordable. The arts advocate also sits on the Howard County Housing Commission and recalls the vehement reaction against additional affordable housing when the commission moved to purchase a property in the neighborhood. He described the response as, "We like diversity, just not too much diversity, which to me is the biggest rejection of Jim Rouse's views that you could have."

It's a frustrating sentiment given the rare alchemy that Kennedy sees when he takes his kids to school. "Our school reflects the diversity of America today, which to me is the promise of Jim Rouse. It's a school that's making multiculturalism work," he says. "It works precisely because of the way Jim Rouse built this community."

For the lucky few, the benefits of tumbling into such an intentional community, even if by chance, are palpable. "Even for families who don't speak a word of English, there's that sense of a community school," Diaz says. "Everybody can walk if they want. We feel lucky we're in Columbia because the pool is right next door and the village center is down the street." For Diaz, the stakes of Columbia's transformation are high. Whatever happens downtown will influence the next era of growth in Oakland Mills and undoubtedly will play a role in shaping how many more newcomers find a place in Rouse's next America.

LET'S MAKE A DEAL

In February, Paul Casey of the Columbia Downtown Housing Corporation, Howard Hughes' John DeWolf, Howard County Executive Allan Kittleman and Carole MacPhee of the Howard County Housing Commission held a signing ceremony in the lobby of the Metropolitan.

The foursome signed on the dotted line of a 30-year housing deal between Howard Hughes and Howard County. If all goes as planned, downtown Columbia will see an infusion of 900 low- and moderate-income apartments over the next 25 years, mixed in among the 5,500 market-rate units expected to be built. That will mean more than 15 percent of the new housing in downtown Columbia is affordable, at least for the next 40 years.

It's the kind of deal that likely would have made Rouse beam — the Rouse Company's successor seemed poised to succeed where his own efforts had stopped short — but reaching the finish line was no mean feat, and revealed telling attitudes at Howard Hughes that evolved over time to finally fit into something resembling the Columbia mold.

The landmark deal's roots go back to the 2010 downtown Columbia plan, which required downtown developers to pay into a housing trust fund. But a few years in, Casey realized, "The existing mechanisms weren't going to produce affordable housing."

He recounted the housing plan's backstory for me in the flowering courtyard of an old barn salvaged from Howard County's agricultural days. The Barn now serves as the Oakland Mills community center. It's where the Oakland Mills Village Board of Directors — all white and middle-aged, according to the photos on the wall — meets, and residents come if they want to use a copier or pick up information about the neighborhood. There's also an event hall that, the receptionist tells me, Latino families in the neighborhood rent out for quinceñeras a couple of times per year.

Casey, a retired Baltimore lawyer sporting an Orioles baseball cap, is the pro bono president of the Columbia Downtown Housing Corporation, which was authorized in 2012 to administer the housing trust fund. A cheerful deal-maker with a can-do attitude, he described his team's first forays. The Metropolitan and another new apartment building, plus required payments from Howard Hughes, put $5 million in the bank. But when the Housing Corporation approached Kettler, the D.C.-area developer of The Metropolitan, about partnering on an affordable housing project, they shrugged their shoulders, considering their work done once the payment was made. Next Casey turned to Howard Hughes, which controls 90 percent of the land in downtown Columbia — the most crucial ingredient to get affordable housing off the ground — and has a non-voting seat on the Housing Corporation's board.

In the best-case scenario, the trust fund would receive $35 million, and even then most of it would be put in toward the end of the master plan's 30-year timeline. The Housing Corporation and Howard Hughes ran the numbers, and in June 2014 arrived at a maximum figure of 300 affordable units in Howard Hughes' soon-to-be built properties, with future projects down the road left to be negotiated.

"We thought we had a deal and frankly we went into radio silence," Casey says. "For three months we heard nothing." Finally, the verdict came back from Howard Hughes' Dallas headquarters: No.

Two years in, new market-rate housing with no affordable units were already under construction and the Housing Corporation had no luck with two real estate developers, including the one responsible for the overall build-out of downtown Columbia. Frustrated, Casey's group reported back to the Howard

County Council. Unless the master plan is changed, they said, affordable housing in downtown will fall flat.

In fall 2014, the Council directed the Housing Corporation to become a study group. They met monthly in Howard Hughes' downtown Columbia office to discuss development models, but the developer stayed on the sidelines.

In February 2015, the Housing Corporation came up with an across-the-board 10 percent inclusionary zoning requirement. "They didn't like it," Casey recalled of Hughes' reaction. A few months later, Hughes presented a counterproposal prepared by an economic consulting group that deemed the inclusionary zoning plan unworkable. In the Hughes plan, there would be 180 very-low-income and 180 moderate-income units, but neither set would be permanently affordable; once the first tenant left, the units could revert to market rate. The plan also identified future locations in downtown for low-income housing tax credits.

Casey and his team, in turn, balked at the counteroffer. "Candidly, we didn't think it did enough," he says. At this point, Howard Hughes seemed exasperated by the affordable housing issue. "We're neither for nor against affordable housing, but we are for fully executing what's been put in front of us," John DeWolf, who at the time was Howard Hughes' VP in charge of Columbia, told The Baltimore Sun. "We recognize that establishing a full spectrum of housing downtown is an important part," he added.

Appletree, who was still on the Housing Corporation at the time, put it more simply. "Howard Hughes did not have Rouse's vision. In fact, when they came in, they had no housing expertise — it was not their field or their passion," he says.

A fanciful play area fronts The Metropolitan, the first new apartment building built under downtown Columbia's forward-looking plan.

Finally, realizing that without a compromise nothing would be built, Howard County Councilor Mary Kay Sigaty knocked heads together and told the two sides to sit down and come up with something mutually agreeable. The resulting plan offers three types of affordable housing. First, Howard Hughes will build 200 permanently affordable very-low-income units and 200 units marked moderate income for 40 years. These apartments will be sprinkled throughout their buildings and feature the same finishes if slightly smaller layouts. There won't be separate entrances for low-income tenants.

Second, Howard County and Howard Hughes will donate land on five key sites where the Howard County Housing Commission will develop a total of 417 low-income housing tax credit units in larger mixed-income buildings. Plans show units atop a future transit center and an existing fire station that will become senior apartments.

Third, 83 units will be sponsored by a "live near where you work" scheme. Modeled on Detroit Live Downtown, the housing trust fund will work to make it possible for employees to live near their jobs. Already the Housing Corporation is talking to the hospital and community college, and hopes future employers moving to downtown Columbia will come on board. Howard Hughes will pay another $3.2 million into the housing trust fund to support this effort. It also agreed to accept guarantees from the Housing Corporation that will cover the security deposit for tenants who end up receiving the downtown incentive, as the typical first month/last month/security bundle is often a hurdle for low-wage workers who can afford the monthly rent but can't pay such a large chunk of change upfront.

As one of the plan's architects, Casey marvels in its particulars and insists on a happy ending after several years of false starts. Reflecting on the evolution of the master development, he is sanguine. "I do think Howard Hughes ended up becoming a good partner," he says. "Somebody [at the company] has come to realize that in Columbia there's an added set of values. It's not just profit; it's the vitality of a diverse community and a commitment from the earliest days that we must find a way to develop an all-inclusive community, which provides opportunity for every economic, ethnic and racial group. We're a stronger, better community because of that."

The soured Appletree is more circumspect. He argues that the result was a sweetheart deal for Howard Hughes because the five tax credit sites will count as "the only new housing opportunities." Instead, he believes, the moderate-income units will serve renters who can already afford market-rate apartments elsewhere in Columbia and the low-income units will rely on existing housing vouchers, not new subsidies. Appletree calls the public funds that will be directed to Howard Hughes as the eventual landlord of much of the subsidized housing as "grossly misallocating millions of dollars."

What's more, the same November council vote approved $90 million in tax increment financing for Howard Hughes — $51 million of it to build a 9-story parking garage next to Merriweather. Appletree recalls the TIF as the real battle Hughes fought for behind the scenes, ultimately willing to compromise on the housing plan in order to ensure the lucrative public financing, which many residents opposed as a developer giveaway. **In April, four developers also working in Howard County sued to have the TIF renegotiated**.

"They played hardball from Texas and they won, they out-negotiated the county," he says. In his mind, it was actually Howard County, more so than Howard Hughes, that "picked up the mantle from James Rouse." After all, the County initiated the downtown plan in the mid-2000s, long before Howard Hughes was on the scene.

"No one [at the county] pushed for a standard relative to what Rouse would have done," he says. "I'm not saying it's a bad plan, but it's not better than Rouse."

IN THE DNA

As the dust settles from last year's county politics, the affordable housing debate is prompting further reflections on how Columbia can live up to its founding ideals and not become just another rich, exclusive suburb. Jane Dembner, a planner at the Columbia Association, greets the impending affordable housing downtown as exactly the right move. "You've got the highest opportunity in downtown Columbia and that is where you want to put investments in subsidized housing," she says. "People with limited means can live well and take full advantage."

The result was vindication for those who **rallied** in favor of affordable housing a year ago — a refreshing sight when so many affluent U.S. communities protest against it — but the harder challenge will be taking the vision into neighborhoods where people are already living.

Fortunately, Columbia is starting from a healthy background, one without redlining. While Howard County once had segregated schools and housing, Columbia's integrated-from-the-start approach is part of the city's DNA.

A biracial couple purchased Columbia's first home, much to Rouse's delight. Growing up, my block and elementary school were not all white. And a spin through Columbia in 2017 will reveal a polyglot crowd doing homework at the library and multiracial families taking a stroll around the lake. "People may not know who James Rouse is, but biracial or triracial couples, they come here and it feels normal," Dembner says.

A 2014 Baltimore housing market study deemed Columbia one of just four suburbs in the region that could be called "truly multiracial."

Breaking down barriers around income, however, which can often correlate with race and ethnicity, are a harder sell. "There is some anxiety of longtime white and black residents about the economic status of some of their neighbors," Dembner says. "People don't necessarily say that. They talk about 'renters.'"

In my old village of Hickory Ridge, for example, plans last year to build apartments — much like Alta Wilde Lake — prompted complaints of an "eyesore" that would "devalue our property."

Unless that kind of attitude changes, Columbia has no chance of recapturing its city-upon-a-hill pedigree from its founding days. National affordable housing expert Rick Jacobus told me that a housing plan like Columbia's, which is just focused on downtown renters, lags behind other affluent suburbs. He notes next-door Montgomery County or across-the-country King County, Washington, as national models that both address the issue across their entire geography. But he acknowledges that such efforts are usually confined to areas near public transportation. "There are lots of scattered examples of affordable rental housing being built in mostly single-family neighborhoods but the opposition of local homeowners continues to be a major barrier even in the most progressive communities," he admits. And barring a few community land trusts, like Community Partners for Affordable Housing outside Chicago, there are almost no examples of rich suburbs trying to make homeownership more accessible.

Columbia does have a shot at innovative social policy, however, by borrowing another Chicago-area model: the Oak Park Regional Housing Center. Oak Park was once a lily-white suburb, but as the community watched blockbusting just over the border in Chicago, the town banded together to buck the trend. In 1968 it passed a municipal fair housing ordinance, followed in 1972 by the establishment of the Housing Center, which seeks to provide objective information about housing to any and all comers. Nowadays, Oak Park is 67.7 percent white and widely known as a community of choice for people of all races.

Does Columbia need something similar? "We have begun to see pockets of concentration of African-American and Latino residents, as old U.S. stereotypes take hold and white apartment seekers find those areas less desirable. If left unchecked, this will erode Columbia's social fabric and economic prosperity," reads a two-page prospectus for a Columbia Regional Housing Center.

In practice, the proposed center would serve as a matchmaker between tenants and landlords, while making explicit its mission of promoting racial integration and encouraging people to choose apartments that further that goal. Although focused on renters, the effort's aims harken back to the Rouse Company's early social engineering, when it would ban builders and realtors who steered families into look-alike neighborhoods, and even went so far as to persuade an individual black family not to become the fifth and final resident of an already all-black cul-de-sac.

"If we don't act now, when signs of racial concentration are few, our job will be harder down the road, and our integrated community, which has made Columbia so special, could be lost," the prospectus continues. "If we do act, we can enhance opportunity and we can lessen the public backlash against affordable housing and apartments, which are so needed in our community."

In the absence of progressive ideas like community land trusts and cooperative housing, the housing center represents contemporary Columbia's best chance to strike new ground. As Dembner asks, "How can we intentionally continue to keep it integrated, diverse and inclusive?"

EDITOR'S NOTE: The original version of this article included incorrect information about Alta Wilde Lake's adherence to the Section 8 voucher program. We've removed the erroneous statement.

Gregory Scruggs is a Seattle-based independent journalist who writes about solutions for cities. He has covered major international forums on urbanization, climate change, and sustainable development where he has interviewed dozens of mayors and high-ranking officials in order to tell

powerful stories about humanity's urban future. He has reported at street level from more than two dozen countries on solutions to hot-button issues facing cities, from housing to transportation to civic engagement to social equity. In 2017, he won a United Nations Correspondents Association award for his coverage of global urbanization and the UN's Habitat III summit on the future of cities. He is a member of the American Institute of Certified Planners.

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Amanda • 3 years ago

Great article. I just moved to Columbia three months ago. I also study transit and the 2002 master plan shows the light rail extending into Columbia. Finishing the light rail line that was adopted in the 2002 plan would be a great benefit to the future of the area, and it would connect workers in the city and suburbs (going both ways). I am often surprised this isn't part of the conversation when talking about the area's future.

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gscruggs → Amanda • 3 years ago

Amanda, in my interviews I heard very little appetite for light rail (as in an extension from Baltimore?). I did hear some idle speculations about rights of way that could send a light rail line from Columbia to the MARC station or maybe on to BWI, but nothing that sounded like a concrete proposal with funding prospects.

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Jen Terrasa • 3 years ago

Enjoyed your article and not just because you called me a "progressive council member"! Kudos on Next City's mission to produce independent journalism for stronger cities!

• Share ›

The Hill staff • 3 years ago

That headline doesn't mean anything. Re-do it.

• Share ›

JeanSC • 3 years ago

I couldn't take the time to read the whole article thoroughly. I do know - from experience - that one excellent way to keep housing affordable is by using the tools of the land trust and the co-op. Not to mention the management has to be top-notch.

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