Owen Posnett

25 July 2024

LISC Fellowship Article

My fellowship placement with Victory Housing allowed me to shift my focus from federal housing policy to the inner workings of affordable nonprofit development. In doing so, I was able to explore what I researched in my undergraduate senior thesis (examining the role of community engagement in zoning and city planning) and apply it to real life work. My summer work with Victory has been marked by two major tasks: conducting outreach for a DC community meeting and working on applications for District government funding for affordable development. Along the way, I have assisted with drafting budgets, conducted environmental and financial research, created a website plan, and conducted many other tasks that taught me about the ethos and practices of community development. While I had always hoped to enter a career in housing policy or city planning, serving as a Fellow has encouraged me to pursue career opportunities in affordable housing development.

LISC partnered me with Victory Housing, a nonprofit affordable developer, to assist a project manager with a proposed development. After a competitive application process, the District awarded a tract of land on one of Anacostia's main streets to Victory and its partners on the development team. The development program in discussion includes affordable senior apartments in a first multi-family building, 3500 square feet of retail space in a second multi-family building, townhomes for homeownership, and an alleyway which would provide space for car and foot traffic in the area. This plan would create a space where low-income seniors could move to independent-living apartments in the community many already reside in, while also providing for increased family homeownership opportunities and connection to the nearby 11th

Street Bridge Park. Equitable development in low-income neighborhoods requires accepting the input of the whole community, and through a series of community meetings that Victory hosted before my summer fellowship, they determined that establishing retail space for individual businesses and providing residents with more than the required amount of parking would be important to the residents. Based on the plan for the development, I worked on a "self-scoring" assessment to prepare for an application for DC government funding, in which I brainstormed ways to maximize amenities and create opportunities for low-income seniors to benefit from the development. I collected and synthesized data on local rents and previous apartment budgets to develop estimates of our project costs, and I attended meetings to learn about the work done to make sure the site was environmentally safe.

In July, Victory hosted a community meeting in which we received feedback from some attendees who wanted more market-rate rents in order to drive investment in Anacostia. The meeting raised the same questions of equitability in community development that I had studied in school. While it is true that poverty is concentrated in Ward 8, which is home to the most low-income residents and residents of color in DC, the property's design has received support from the Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC), and affordable senior housing with retail opportunities would add to affordable housing goals for the whole District while providing amenities to those living in Anacostia. Residents expressed concern at the meeting that the District was not building affordable housing in higher-income areas, particularly in Ward 3. Given that the current market rates for this area are at or below LIHTC rents, in the last few weeks of my fellowship, the team has contended with the feedback of these residents and are working to figure out solutions that can respond to this feedback while still addressing the community desires previously expressed. It is my opinion that the struggle to build affordably in

all areas of the city can lead to an undue burden on one community, but one group of developers is unable to singlehandedly solve these problems.

At LISC meetings and seminars, we learned about listening to all sides of a community and taking both demographics and place into account when encouraging growth. However, "What do you do when some community members would rather have no development at all?" remains an ongoing question. My research has explored methods of communication that can ameliorate conflicts in the development process, and I wonder if I could work in my career to better coordinate interchange between different groups involved in planning and economic development. Affordable development is necessary in all communities, but high-income communities must face more of a burden than they do currently; while we cannot simply change the market forces that cause systemic inequality, we can change the way that we converse with and listen to our communities. In order to shift structurally disadvantaged systems for the better, community development advocates must change structures of communication and get multiple competing forces on the same side.