

Columbia Renews Commitment to Diversity

IN 1967, the master developer of Columbia, Maryland—now an unincorporated suburb of 100,000 outside of Baltimore—envisioned a racially and economically integrated community in which diverse groups would mingle, living in both apartments and single-family homes, and everyone would have equal access to schools, jobs, and parks.

This month, as the planned community celebrates its 50th anniversary, local planners have partnered with Oak Park, Illinois, a Chicago suburb of 52,000 that has made strides to integrate racial groups since the 1970s, to create a housing model they hope will help preserve James Rouse's vision for Columbia for decades to come.

Demographic, housing trends

About half of Columbia's population is white, a quarter African American, 11 percent Asian, eight percent Hispanic, and around seven percent multiracial. While that's on par with the makeup of the Baltimore metro region, Columbia's neighborhoods are far more racially integrated, says Dan Pontious, housing policy coordinator for the Baltimore Metropolitan Council.

He says that only nine percent of individual U.S. census tracts within the Baltimore region have a balance of all racial groups, compared to two-thirds of tracts in Columbia.

However, over the last 10 years or so, Latino and African Americans are becoming overrepresented among renters and in certain neighborhoods, while fewer white home owners are choosing to live in areas with high rental concentrations. The Columbia Association (the city's management organization) feared this might signal the start of a trend toward segregation, which if left unchecked could affect home values and other measures of prosperity.

"Now is the time—before any significant segregation patterns emerge—to work intentionally to retain the diversity and integration of our community," says Jane Dembner, AICP, the Columbia

Association's director of planning and community affairs.

Intentional integration

To that end, Columbia housing leaders are looking specifically to a plan that Oak Park enacted in 1972 to create the non-profit Oak Park Regional Housing Center.

Housing center staff helps renters narrow down the list of available apartments according to their housing needs and then encourages them to consider apartments in neighborhoods that will lead to the greatest diversity, rather than allowing racial groups to naturally segregate.

When the center launched, Oak Park was 99 percent white; today it is about 68 percent white, 22 percent African American, 3.6 percent Latino, and the rest Asian and American Indian. Oak Park leaders believe this diversity has led to valuable social and economic gains, including good schools and neighborhoods for all.

To promote integration, planning must be intentional, says Rob Breymaier, executive director of Oak Park's housing center. He admits that housing seekers are often reluctant to move to areas where they believe their racial group is underrepresented. He says center staff works closely with potential renters to educate them on the neighborhoods and their amenities.

Columbia launched an exploratory committee last fall to begin setting up a housing center modeled after Oak Park's.

"Columbia has a remarkable history of being founded in an intentional way as a racially integrated place," says Pontious of the BMC. "This effort in Columbia could be [powerful] and could provide a model for the region and the rest of the country." ■

—Erin Mulvaney

Mulvaney is a journalist based in Washington, D.C. For more on Columbia, Maryland, see "Slight Change of Plans," February 2016; planning.org/planning/2016/feb/slightchange.htm.

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FORT WORTH, Texas, has approved plans for high-speed rail to Dallas to relieve vehicle congestion. The DFW Core Express will be up to 40 miles long, with a possible stop in Arlington. City council is proposing a local government corporation with Dallas, a vital step in the process, says Michael Morris, director of transportation for the North Central Texas Council of Governments. A \$15 million environmental impact study of potential routes is expected by 2018; cost estimates of construction have yet to be determined.

AMAZON WILL SHARE its newest downtown Seattle office with a homeless shelter. Currently occupying a motel once owned by Amazon on the project site, Mary's Place will receive half of the six-story building, or 47,000 square feet. Amazon is set to pay for the shelter's utilities, along with costs for design and construction, which will begin this fall. Seattle currently has an estimated homeless population exceeding 10,000, a surge often attributed to the region's tech boom.

CONGRESS AGREED on a \$1 trillion omnibus spending bill in May to avoid shutdown. The fiscal 2017 federal budget, which will keep the government running through September, gives \$1.5 billion more to border security and infrastructure, increases clean energy and science funding by \$17 million, maintains the budget for sanctuary cities, and cuts the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's spending by only one percent. Washington is now looking ahead to fiscal year 2018, the first full-year budget of President Donald Trump's administration.