BREATHING LIFE INTO A BLIGHTED COMMUNITY

One of the Philadelphia Housing Authority's most distressed developments is the Norman Blumberg Apartments ("Blumberg"). It is a dense eight-acre site, with 510 units in three high-rise towers and 18 low-rise buildings. It is located in the Sharswood/Blumberg section of North Philadelphia, where, more than 50 years ago, race riots destroyed what was once a vibrant community.

Closed factories, substandard housing, high unemployment, neglected schools, racial profiling, and incidents of police brutality all describe that neighborhood now. While the city's poverty rate is over 26 percent, Blumberg's is nearly 63 percent. The crime rate is double that of the city's. Only 16 percent of Blumberg residents are employed, and 33 percent of residents above the age of 18 do not have a high school diploma.

By almost any measure, Blumberg/Sharswood is a top contender for Philadelphia's worst community. This is a description from the Daily News last summer: "dozens of stores and small businesses - most white-owned - ... boarded up, ... leaving holes that still remain. Buildings with rusted-out tin facades and plywood windows alternate like moldy chess pieces with weedy green patches of grass; on 22nd, the front door of an empty building throws wide open to a room littered with food cartons and trash; a ... man nearby sunk into a folding chair asks a stranger to buy him a soda. It is impossible not to think: What the hell happened here?"

I asked myself the same question when I first saw the area about three years ago, as president and CEO of PHA. But I also believed that this desperation had to change and PHA had to act. Therefore, PHA created the Sharswood/Blumberg Redevelopment Initiative, its single most important transformative project in more than a decade. It involves demolishing the Blumberg towers, assembling parcels for redevelopment, igniting private investment, and rebuilding all four pillars of community revitalization: housing, education, economic development, and social services.

Critics say in response to the plan that PHA is concentrating poverty. Instead, it should just remove the Blumberg high-rises and then shoo its existing residents away with vouchers, letting the private market step in. Others worry that gentrification will result from the planned improvements. Here's what those critics are missing: PHA plans to invest in improving the community, something no one else has done in more than 50 years, by focusing on three priorities:

Deconcentrate poverty by demolishing and replacing every Blumberg unit with less-dense affordable housing.

Acquire more than 1,300 unproductive properties (mainly vacant lots from the demolition of abandoned row homes) for new housing for families of all incomes, and have private developers involved in rebuilding the neighborhood.

Act to have plans become realities. PHA applied for demolition approval; applied for 9 percent low-income-housing tax credits to build 57 new affordable housing units; applied for new federal funding for 96 senior units; and started design of PHA's consolidated central office to be located in the community.

Success will be aided by the fact that where PHA reinvests, the private market follows and the ripple effects show extensive benefits. A December Econsult report on the economic impact of PHA's housing redevelopment estimated it to be "$1.2 billion, supporting 7,800 jobs with earnings of $520 million. ... The potential annual economic impact in the commonwealth is an estimated $43 million, with $40 million occurring in Philadelphia. This will support an estimated 520 jobs annually in the city, with earnings of $20 million."

Further, surrounding property values should increase by 5 to 15 percent, with "a potential additional $640,000 to $1.9 million in property tax revenues to the city of Philadelphia and $790,000 to $2.4 million to the School District of Philadelphia annually."

PHA's aim is to provide a neighborhood of choice for all and to ensure that low-income residents, as well as their neighbors, benefit from improved schools, businesses, and commercial zones in a flourishing community. We will continue to seek public-private partnerships and coordinate with federal, state, and city governments. We appreciate the support of Mayor Nutter, Council President Darrell Clarke, and other elected officials and community leaders who are helping us create a community of which we can all be proud.

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