

A conversation with Oramenta Newsome

No conversation about affordable housing in D.C. is worth having if she's not a part of it



By Sean Madigan
Senior Staff Reporter

When Oramenta Newsome came to D.C. in the mid-1990s, the city was careening toward bankruptcy. There was no shortage of affordable housing because nobody wanted to invest in the city.

Imagine that.

As head of the New York-based Local Initiatives Support Corp.'s D.C. office, Newsome's job was to work with an energetic bunch of nonprofits to leverage private-sector investments to finance affordable housing and community development projects.

As it turns out, that job wasn't as difficult a sell as some might have predicted. Within five years, the city's fortunes had completely reversed. A once slow trickle of capital had become a geyser. For the past five years money has been gushing all over the city. The once-skimpy housing stock is more valuable than ever.

Newsome's job is radically different.

Affordable housing has become nearly unaffordable. Newsome is no longer trying to prime the private sector pump. She's helping the city's working poor hang on to the few properties in town they can still afford to live in.

Are these latest cries for affordable housing the loudest they've been in years?

This is the loudest I have heard them in my 10 years here. I was recently at the Potomac Conference where the discussion ranged around the issues that the region is facing. The top two were affordable housing and regional transportation. I have to be honest — and I don't know if I would want you to quote me this way — but I didn't think I would be here long enough to see affordable housing rise to that level in a regional discussion. So clearly, it's not just the city.

What did Washington look like when you arrived, compared to now?

From a neighborhood standpoint, there was a lot of vacant housing. Very little investment. A significant population of lower-income households struggling to maintain a quality of life in their neighborhoods ... wanting investment, wanting people to move in. But no real movement in that area. Clearly, the city had severe financial troubles. But we had a very energized set of nonprofits who were on the treadmill of developing housing, developing shopping centers such as Marshall Heights or office buildings such as H Street [NE]. There was a lot of energy among the nonprofits because they knew they were the only game in town. They were the ones making the investments in the neighborhoods, in hope that others would make an investment in the neighborhood. Here we sit 11 years later. Be careful what you wish for, you may get it.

It's not an easy job. It wasn't easy then. It isn't easy now.

Is it a different job now?

When I came in 1995, we were working so hard to redevelop the vacant housing — and getting people in there and making it affordable — and that was hard. But now, we're working in a very high-end, high property value, high-cost market. In '95 we were trying to build a base so that others would come in and invest in the neighborhoods. Today, we are trying to make sure that those households and those families that are the working poor, those with special needs are part of, and can live in, the neighborhoods that now have such high investment. So the nature of the work is different. It is more costly. It takes a lot more ingenuity and creativity. You have to tackle more things. You have to deal with resource development along with trying to have new ideas

about how you develop the resources that are out there.

Are there parts of the city that you look at and say, "We can't afford this anymore?"

No. I firmly believe in what I call equitable development. I don't use the G-word. I think it stops the conversation.

Is "gentrification" just too charged of a word?

Yeah, it doesn't move the conversation forward. The issue is how do we balance the movement of new people and rising values and huge amounts of development — something that we wished for — how do we balance that with making sure there is a place for the working poor? I am unwilling to give up on any neighborhood. If we have the opportunity to develop some affordable housing on Upper Wisconsin Avenue, then by God we should be doing it.

What is the bread and butter project for LISC?

The majority of our work now is investing in midsize or small ... units. Some are subsidized, some are not. We're looking at acquiring those properties either by the tenant association or by a nonprofit or partnership and preserving [them]. The key ... in 2006 is preserving what we already have.

So there is not a philosophy that says we want homeownership?

Well, yeah, there is. Washington D.C., is very much about homeownership. I don't know when we decided that being a renter was a second-class citizen. Not every renter is a homeowner in waiting. There is a need to have a variety of rental housing.

Are there certain neighborhoods you are targeting more aggressively?

Right now, it is so opportunity-driven. People are taking advantage of the opportunities that are presenting themselves in multiple neighborhoods. One of the questions is that the city has created these New Communities [Sursum Corda near North Capitol Street, city public housing projects Barry Farm in Ward 8 and Lincoln Heights in Ward 7]. Clearly the city has made the decision that those are targeted, priority areas. So one of the things to be seen in the future is the role of the nonprofits in those communities.

TITLE: Director, Local Initiatives Support Corp.

RESIDENCE: Columbia

FAMILY: Husband, Wallace

EDUCATION: Auburn University, bachelor's in public administration, 1976; Georgia State University, master's in planning and community development, 1984

LAST BOOK READ: "Freshwater Road," by Denise Nicholas

FAVORITE PLACE TO BE ON A SATURDAY MORNING: Exercising with husband

DRIVES: 1999 Toyota Camry
BUT WISHES IT WERE: 2006 BMW 325

BEST ADVICE RECEIVED THIS YEAR: Hire another staff person

THE WORST DECISION MADE THIS WEEK: Not to exercise three days in a row

WHEN STUCK IN TRAFFIC, SINGS ALONG TO: "I don't get stuck; I ride the train."