

Planning with the End in Mind

Atlanta's Mixed Income Communities: Planning with the End in Mind Transcript

Jessica Dill: *Welcome to the Federal Center for Real Estate Analytics podcast series. I'm Jessica Dill with the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta. Today we're talking with Renée Glover, president and CEO of the Atlanta Housing Authority, to find out more about trends in public housing.*

Ms. Glover, thank you for joining us.

Renée Glover: Well, thank you. I'm honored to participate.

Dill: *What is the current trend in public housing, and more specifically, what is the Atlanta model and how did you arrive at that model?*

Glover: Well, let me start with your first question. I believe that there is a national trend toward community building. What I mean by that is I think we need to stop the practice of concentrating families in poverty, and we've got to holistically build community around things that will strengthen society at its core.

In terms of the Atlanta model, there's an old saying: "You have to plan with the end in mind." The end that we have in mind is economically integrated communities where families can thrive and can be successful. So, we came up with some guiding principles:

First, we wanted to end the practice of concentrating poor families in distressed communities because we knew that type of approach does not yield healthy, self-sufficient families or healthy children focused on their future and their education.

Second, we needed to engage private partners.

[Third, we needed] to create great market-rate communities with opportunities for low-income families.

{ That then means, what kind of financial engineering would we have to do in order to make those opportunities available and affordable to those families?

The fourth guiding principle is to look at all of the elements needed for a healthy community to thrive. The first element is always making sure that the neighborhood public schools are the very best so that the kids are being prepared to be competitive in a global world. The second is looking at the quality of the green space and other infrastructure in the community in terms of retail, restaurants, recreational facilities that really make for a good community and a desirable destination.

The fifth guiding principle has everything to do with developing the human capital and setting the standards and expectations as high as possible.

That, in effect, describes the model, but in simpler terms what we are doing is mainstreaming the families, mainstreaming the real estate, and, as a consequence, mainstreaming the Atlanta Housing Authority to be a community builder as opposed to an organization that is just focused on running programs that don't pay attention to the outcome.

Dill: *Does the Atlanta Housing Authority track its former tenants? How have they fared, and where have they gone?*

Glover: We absolutely track the residents who were living in the former housing projects. The good news is that, once they are out of these very dysfunctional projects that concentrated poverty, the families have moved on to do all kinds of wonderful things. We actually have enlisted various academic institutions to do studies to look at how the families are faring when they move, and, without exception, the reports established that the families are living in much better communities, in terms of better school zones, better amenities, better jobs, and lesser impacts of poverty.

Dill: *Given the unprecedented unemployment rates, have you witnessed a change in the demographic of those who come to the Housing Authority looking for help?*

Glover: Well, you know, it's interesting. In 2004, we decided that in order to help break the vicious cycle of poverty, we had to raise standards and expectations. One of our requirements is that families are engaged in the workforce, job training, or education in order to be eligible for the subsidy that is provided. As a consequence, we have not seen any dramatic change in the demographics because with the families understanding what the standards are, we typically see families who are either engaged in job training, education, or the workforce.

Dill: *Do the existing housing policies and housing infrastructure have the capacity to meet the new need and greater demand caused by the economic crisis?*

Glover: Inevitably, there is always going to be more demand than we will ever have in terms of infrastructure. Once you rule out the elderly, who are at the end of their careers and certainly need great quality, affordable housing—and I think that our infrastructure is really being built up to meet that need—and then you take out the disabled persons who, either through illness or birth, have disabilities such that they need support to live—that's something our infrastructure is seeking to develop itself more to meet that need—then we come to families who need to be sure that we are providing the kind of educational training and support to be competitive in a global society. If we can do that, I think we can cut down on just the sheer numbers of persons who are needing the kind of support that I think this program was originally envisioned and created to meet.

Dill: *What policy changes would be most helpful for addressing the housing needs of low-income*

families in the future, and what types of housing models are being considered?

Glover: We actually are in an era of good discussion around the right level of regulation that's needed in the housing arena. Oftentimes, the thought is [that] the more something is regulated, the more effective that program may be, but sometimes you can go too far with the regulatory scheme and it then causes unintended consequences. So the models that we're seeing are moving more towards mixed-income communities.

I think there is a great move toward making sure that when buildings are developed and built, and even when they are rehabilitated or modernized, there is a big emphasis on environmental considerations. This will have two benefits. One, it will lower the cost to families who pay the utilities, but it will also create a much healthier environmental condition where families are living. If we are truly able to strike the right balance and create economically integrated communities with greater density and mixed uses, communities will be sustainable and desirable places to live.

Dill: *Ms. Glover, thanks again for joining us.*

Glover: Well, thank you.

Dill: *This concludes our podcast with Renée Glover from the Atlanta Housing Authority. For more podcasts on this topic, and others, visit the Atlanta Fed's website at www.frbatlanta.org. If you have comments or questions, please email podcast@frbatlanta.org.*

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