
Bus tour highlights city's history of housing discrimination

Posted on [November 24, 2010](#) | [Leave a comment](#)



Shinto Gate

By Devan Schwartz, Contributing Columnist

On Thursday, Nov. 4 the [Fair Housing Council of Oregon](#) led a bus tour through Portland's neighborhoods, narrating a checkered past. The non-profit organization's tour reinforced how far this city has come and how far it still has to go on the path toward equitable housing that is universally affordable and accessible.

Though many of the attendees—including members of Habitat for Humanity, the Oregon Opportunity Network, and Cascadia Housing—consistently deal with housing issues, they were nevertheless impacted by Multnomah County's discriminatory history.

“Only one-tenth of illegal housing practices are reported,” said Diane Hess, indicating the difficulty of grasping the scope of both contemporary and historical discriminatory practices. Hess is the educational director of the Fair Housing Council and served as the bus's animated tour-guide.

One of the first stops was North Portland's Delta Park, the former site of Vanport. It was a hastily built city of public housing for shipworkers of the Kaiser Company. Situated on a floodplain, Vanport was inundated on Memorial Day, 1948. Ed Washington, Portland State University's Community Liaison for Diversity Initiatives, spoke about his childhood years spent there. Washington reflected on watching the flood with his family—bearing witness from a hill now housing Interstate 5. The waters killed fifteen people and took with them one of the few affordable, centrally-planned communities in the area. Portland State University also had its roots

Another piece of World War II-era history brought the tour to the Expo Center. Valerie Otani, a community artist who designed the traditional Torii Gate near the MAX line, discussed the Expo Center's past as a Japanese internment camp. 3,500 Japanese-Americans were interned at what was then called the Portland Assembly Center during the blisteringly-hot summer of 1942. Many were then taken by train to California, Idaho, or Montana. Some of the Japanese-Americans held in the Portland Assembly Center's internment camp were briefly released to farm sugar beets for military explosives; during this time the Bracero program also brought in Mexican agricultural laborers to the area, a detail still resonating culturally with the Latino population of Hood River.

Moving into contemporary history, Portland State University professor Randy Blazak narrated a spine-chilling 1988 hate crime in Southeast Portland. Our bus stopped on the corner of 31st Avenue at the apartment complex of Mulugeta Seraw. Seraw was an Ethiopian student killed by local skinheads affiliated with East Side White Pride.

The bus tour cruised along to many areas within Portland's city grid. Here are some of the remaining highlights (though our guide was quick to deem them lowlights): the racially segregated Albina neighborhood; protests of Emanuel Hospital at North Williams Avenue and Russell Street that occurred when local businesses were razed for an expansion that never occurred; the destruction and relocation of Chinese and Japanese neighborhoods downtown.

It wasn't your average tour of the Portland sights. And though the Fair Housing Council of Oregon adopted an historical and educational tone, they also mentioned at a roundtable discussion afterward how their hotlines still receive between 2,000-3,000 calls a year.

The event was organized by [Oregon Opportunity Network](#).

According to the FHCO Enforcement Coordinator Luke Griffin, "By far the largest group facing [housing] discrimination in the state of Oregon are those with disabilities." Such fair housing complaints might range from a landlord refusing to install a wheelchair ramp to disallowing a service animal in the building—going against the 1968 Fair Housing Act and its subsequent amendments.

Griffin also cited many calls from the federally protected classes of familial status and national origin. A property owner might tell a family with children they shouldn't live there because of a busy street corner; though such advice may be commonsensical, it's also discriminatory and takes the decision out of the hands of the potential renters.

Oftentimes, those whose appearances indicate national origins other than the United States are asked to provide a social security card or state driver's license. Neither are legally required in Oregon so long as other forms of identification can be shown.

The fact is that Portland has a past chock-full of shameful displays of discrimination. And though city officials and public policies have evolved in many ways, including a greater dedication to civil and human rights, Multnomah County also reflects a myriad of national trends within affordable housing and homelessness which are moving in the wrong direction.

According to the Northwest Pilot Project, the number of units available downtown to single, full-time minimum

wage earners has consistently dropped over the last thirty years: in 1978, 5,183 units were available; in 2010, only 3,315 still qualified. Stagnated wages, an increased cost-of-living, and waves of gentrification and urban renewal have pushed many residents further and further from Portland's urban center.

In some cases, federal funds slated to aid in the fight for affordable housing were hijacked by the current recessionary climate. A report by the Western Regional Advocacy Project details the fate of the National Housing Trust Fund (NHTF), which was chartered to "build, rehabilitate or preserve 1.5 million units of affordable housing over the next 10 years." Though passed by George W. Bush in 2008, the NHTF was tied to mortgage profits from Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, which have since been put on governmental life-support. Much of these funds still hang in congressional budgetary limbo as part of the American Jobs and Closing Tax Loopholes of 2010. Meanwhile, foreclosure rates, job losses, and the number of community-members experiencing homelessness have all gone up. Thus, the need for such funds is worse than ever.

In 2009, Oregon's Ending Homelessness Advisory Council began a ten-year plan to end homelessness with a one-night headcount. Though such counts can be inaccurate understatements of more endemic situations, over 17,000 were still found to be homeless. And while wages drop and jobs evaporate, housing prices around the Portland metro area continue to rise, as the Oregon Housing Alliance has noted.

The bus tour and the recognition of current unfair housing practices demonstrate the fact that as Portland moves forward it may also be moving backward. The United States government pays lip-service to the need to end homelessness while red-lining the budgets for affordable housing. As always the past is an infinite inkwell that can inform and better our collective futures, but if we don't learn the lessons of the past we may be doomed to repeat or even exacerbate them.

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