

Lessons learned? What Portland leaders did -- and didn't do -- as people of color were forced to the fringes

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Beth Nakamura/The Oregonian

Imani Muhammad walks across Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard in Northeast Portland, where she grew up. She still considers the area home but can no longer afford to live there. Muhammad says it's hard to watch people who once shunned the area benefit from the improvements longtime residents fought so hard to get.

Imani Muhammad remembers when she no longer felt at home in the Northeast Portland neighborhoods where she'd spent most of her life.

By 2000, black-owned shops where she got handmade soaps and Now and Later candy had given way to white-owned boutiques. Neighbors who used to ask about her grandmother had been replaced with strangers who passed without speaking.

These days, the city markets **Northeast Alberta Street** as a travel destination, but Muhammad finds it difficult to share in a feeling of success.

"If you walk up and down Alberta and Mississippi, a lot of businesses don't reach out to black and

Latino culture," said Muhammad, 31, who works on community initiatives for the **Northeast Coalition of Neighborhoods**. "To see outside your door so quickly the advancement without us, you realize change didn't include us."

GRAPHIC: PORTLAND'S CENTRAL CITY GETS WHITER

Worse, community members say, it didn't have to be this way.

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As gentrification in the past decade pushed nearly 10,000 people of color -- including Muhammad -- from the city core, Portland officials didn't do enough to protect diversity and even helped gentrification along, community leaders say.

What they did -- and didn't do -- holds lessons as city leaders seek to expand urban renewal farther into North and Northeast Portland and to shape the next 25-year Portland Plan.

Early warnings

One critical missed opportunity began as an effort to improve equity for low-income and African American communities by bringing a **MAX line to North Interstate Avenue**.

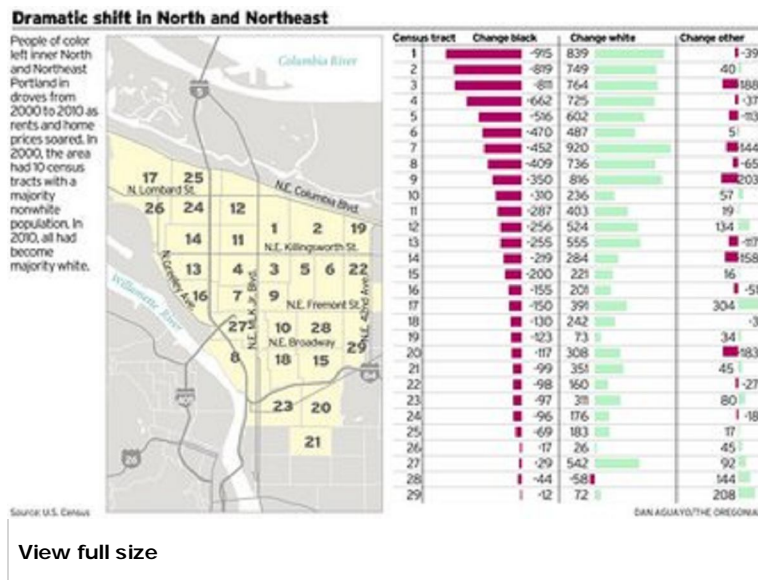
To raise money for the project and encourage development along its route, city leaders in 2000 created a massive 3,744-acre urban renewal zone -- a district that redirects tax revenues to redevelopment -- across 10 North and Northeast neighborhoods.

Early on, neighborhood leaders recognized that improvements, without companion policies to help existing residents stay, could prove disastrous for communities of color. Ross Williams of advocacy group Citizens for Sensible Transportation warned that winning a MAX line would prove hollow if "we built the line and the community's character changed so dramatically that the people we wanted to serve no longer lived there."

The Interstate urban renewal plan outlined anti-displacement strategies, such as ensuring that money generated in the zone would benefit existing residents and businesses, that affordable housing would be a priority, and that renters would get the chance to become homeowners.

But the **Portland Development Commission**, which oversees urban renewal, ended up eliminating the measures. Instead, the Portland City Council created an anti-displacement pilot project that spread \$1.5 million to nonprofits.

One, **Proud Ground**, received \$400,000 to provide down payments to North and Northeast residents. "It was a small start and nowhere near what would potentially be needed to address gentrification," Executive Director Jesse Beason said. Since then, the agency has helped 128 families buy homes.



Portland Community Redevelopment

Initiatives, a nonprofit the city helped launch in the 1990s to assist victims of a predatory lender, has reached more people. The agency manages about 700 units in inner North and Northeast, renting to about 2,000 mostly black and Latino residents at below-market rates. Last year, it received \$2.3 million in urban-renewal and federal money.

"We are providing for a lot of families that last opportunity to stay in the communities where they grew up," said Deborah Turner, deputy director.

Critics, though, say the city has relied too heavily on nonprofits to handle housing issues, even as the Interstate urban renewal zone has raised \$335 million.

In 2006, bending to community pressure, the PDC began setting aside 30 percent of Interstate renewal money for affordable housing.

"The city could have done that from the beginning," said **Daniel Ledezma**, a policy adviser for city **Commissioner Nick Fish**, who oversees the **Housing Bureau**. "But it didn't."

"Do we want equality?"



Beth Nakamura

Joann Jenkins (right) walks through Fresh Pot, a coffee shop on Mississippi Avenue, where urban renewal has helped attract white newcomers while driving out many longtime residents and businesses. Jenkins remembers when the shop was a drugstore. "It's expensive," she said of the neighborhood, but added defiantly. "I ain't going nowhere."

As predicted, the city's largest urban renewal area saw an influx of money, development and improvements after MAX trains started rolling through.

Restaurants such as **Fire on the Mountain** sprang up along Interstate. The PDC used renewal money to turn a **concrete triangle on North Albina Street into a festive plaza** with greenery and seating. **Killingsworth Station**, another PDC project under way, will feature mixed-income housing and retail space.

Longtime residents, who fought for years to get such improvements, welcomed the changes.

But also as predicted, residents of color left in droves as North and Northeast home prices soared

from a median of \$135,450 in 2000 to \$235,950 in 2010, according to the census. In that same time, city data show, white residents received 56 percent of the PDC money spent on homeowner and homebuyer assistance in the area.

Richard Morrill, a **University of Washington professor emeritus** who has studied urban settlement since the 1950s, said Portland is following a pattern among West Coast cities. But the rate of displacement in Portland and Seattle surprised him.

"Portland and Seattle believe in good causes, and us so-called liberals will support school programs and levies," he said, "but that doesn't stop us from gentrifying."

Japonica Brown-Saracino, a **Boston University ethnographer**, said other areas have found ways to protect residents. Massachusetts, for example, puts a portion of money from property sales into an affordable-housing account. East Palo Alto, Calif., requires that developers set aside one of every four units for low- and moderate-income residents. New York and other cities control rents.

Karen Gibson, a **Portland State University urban planner** who has studied gentrification, questions Portland's motives.

"Portland is smug about its progressivism," she said. "But Portland is in denial, and whites don't want to acknowledge

how their policies benefit them -- someone had to sacrifice for these nice 20-minute neighborhoods."

She asked: "Do we want equality in this city? What do we want?"

Looking ahead

Portland Mayor Sam Adams, looking at 2010 census maps, said the changes are disturbing.

His office is studying the data, he said, and equity will be examined in every aspect as the city works on the next **Portland Plan**, a 25-year guide for development, transit and many other issues.

"What I learned from what happened on Mississippi and Interstate is that what we utterly failed to do as a city is procure land and to help people that were already in their homes stay," he said. "Unless government has some control or money on the table, it (gentrification) is inevitable."

Adams said the Portland Plan and a new Office of Equity can set the city on a new course. He has asked the **Housing Bureau** to analyze housing needs in central Portland, and has promised money to help -- though he didn't say how much.

The Housing Bureau, created last year to take over housing programs from the PDC, recently launched an initiative to help elderly minority homeowners in Northeast keep their homes. The budget: \$120,000.

"We don't have money to do first mortgages," said **Margaret Van Vliet**, bureau director. "We don't have very much to do repairs." Next fiscal year, she'll be able to spend \$2.1 million out of a bureau budget of \$90 million for home buyer and homeowner assistance.

Commissioner Amanda Fritz, who will oversee the new Office of Equity, pledged that the office will make gentrification a focus, though she said it's too early to offer details.

"We don't match who we think we are," she said. "This is possibly the most important thing we can do right now."

Adams agrees. "Let's do for equal opportunity what we've already done so successfully for some other important, but frankly less important, realities of Portland," he said. "Access to equal opportunity is more important than recycling, and access to equal opportunity is more important than transportation."

Meanwhile, though, the mayor is leading an effort **to expand the Interstate urban renewal zone deeper into North and Northeast Portland**, with no concrete plans to prevent displacement.

Muhammad is among residents who doubt the city is serious about slowing gentrification. She now lives in **Cully**, in outer Northeast, away from the cultural heart of the state's tiny

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African American population and the community she considers home.

"They've moved the black people out, and it's going to be the same if there is no plan to protect it from what we already went through," she said. Still, she hasn't given up hope of returning to her old neighborhood. She's on a list to move into **Humboldt Gardens**, a 130-unit affordable-housing complex paid for with urban reinvestment dollars.

She has been waiting nearly five years.

--Nikole Hannah-Jones

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Reporter Betsy Hammond contributed to this report.

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