



IS UPZONING A DOWNGRADE FOR THE BLACK COMMUNITY?

Posted by [Jose S Gutierrez Jr](#) / 29 - May - 2019

IS UPZONING A DOWNGRADE FOR THE BLACK COMMUNITY? PREDATORY HOUSING TACTICS AND TRENDS AID MOVEMENT FOR UPZONING IN THE AFRICATOWN-CENTRAL DISTRICT

Charlie is a 92 year-old African-American community member. He has lived in the Central District of Seattle for many decades. Like many other long-time residents of the Central District and South End neighborhoods of Seattle, he is a proud homeowner and considers himself a foundational member of the community, once cordoned off to contain Black citizens. The historic attempt by racist policy-makers and prevailing attitudes in America at the time to segregate people, of course, backfired and ignited the culturally rich Central District and other communities like it across the USA. Now, Charlie has strange people knocking at the door and ringing his doorbell offering him money to move out.

Charlie has been being harassed and threatened repeatedly about moving and being offered money to move he has had to come to the door with his gun to keep people away from his property, says community member and activist, Ruby Holland. Along with the continuing trend of gentrification, whereby a systemic effort to purchase property for redevelopment, coinciding with the process of displacing long-time community members and residents there is an additional element to gentrification, which Charlie is smack dab in the middle of. It is called upsizing, and Holland has found herself in the unenviable position of bringing light to an issue and term that is largely unfamiliar.

As a Seattlite since 1963 and University of Washington graduate, Holland has loved her city and its culture and neighborhood heritage, which prevailed in the Central District. Even after moving to Atlanta for nearly three decades, she kept her ties and affinity for Seattle alive and vibrant. So, when she moved back to Seattle in 2014, after witnessing the naked racism of the south, such as Ku Klux Klan marches through the capital of Georgia in broad daylight and the confederate flag of U.S. Civil War-losers flowing in the wind, high in the sky, Holland thought she may have seen the pinnacle of public racism. Not so, according to Holland. In Seattle, there is an effort to get rid of Black people and people of color in the Central District and South End Part of this effort is with upzoning, says Holland.

Upzoning is a misleading term. Of course, the prefix up refers to higher, elevational and increasing terminology, while zone describes a level of space, size, bigness affixed to the direction, up. But more accurately, upzoning is a process where in single-family home parcels are being purchased by real estate developers,

demolished and replaced with multi-level (high-rise) living units. Picture your neighborhood of homes, perhaps one or two stories maybe with a basement, and in a matter of months, next door on either side there are eight to 12 unit apartments where a one family home once stood. Sounds, okay, right? In Seattle, living space is much needed and highly competitive this upzoning could address this issue. However, for Holland this effort of helping the housing market grow is more sinister than sincere.

The Mandatory Housing Affordability (MHA) Act is targeting the CD and South End, says Holland. This program is supposed to allow developers to acquire property, but they must also contribute to a fund to support affordable living costs this is not happening. Holland is speaking of the MHA Act that went into effect in March of 2019, wherein developers must provide \$5 to 11 dollars per square foot purchased to a fund supporting affordable housing. But what is affordable housing? Affordable housing in the Central District used to be maybe \$800 [to \$1,200] until recently, says Holland. With techies and white people moving in, they can afford \$1,800 per month that is not affordable for our community members [in such a short span of time]. Holland expresses that it is not a problem that new people are moving to the Central District and South End, but displacing community members whose ancestors were confined to these very neighborhoods by inhumane policy is an unjust irony.

Holland suggests what is not difficult to see at all that the Central District and South End are being targeted for Seattles housing re-boom. These neighborhoods are where the most affordable properties in the city are (still not inexpensive by any means). Here are some interesting statistics that highlight the spearhead of upzoning according to Holland. The Mandatory Housing Affordability Act has identified within the city of Seattle that six percent of single family parcels/homes in Seattle are eligible for upzoning. Of the six percent, the majority of these parcels are located in the CD and South End. Of the first 1,000 homes most likely to be upzoned, 85% are located in the CD and South End, says Holland. These are staggering, laser-focused data points that Holland has been astute to pay attention and bring attention to, as she has attended multiple community meetings and conducted research on the MHA Act and upzoning efforts. She does not want to lose her community to high rise apartments engulfing homes like Charlies and many others homes.

One angle for upzoning is that it is an economic opportunity, where development and growth prevail at one end of the spectrum. This would come at the expense of the once-undesirable, once-avoidable, once-feared and taboo areas of Seattle, known as the CD and South End communities historically inhabited by Seattles Black, Latino and Asian community members en masse. The sudden interest and exaggerated pouncing upon these historic districts unnerves Holland and many other community members. Holland wants to bring attention to the case of Charlie and the entire community, and those whom may not know about upzoning and the myriad of impacts that it can have on an unassuming and unaware community.

This program is designed to get rid of people of color, so that White people and tech workers can move in and take our communities, says Ruby Holland. If you sell your house you better be prepared, because you may not be able buy another house. Black people need to up our game and pass our wealth on to our heirs in Seattle, we can pass our homes to our children. If we keep ourselves in the rental market of Seattle, we will be on a path to homelessness.

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