

LAND USE + PLANNING, GOVERNMENT + POLITICS

Community to be displaced in Belmont Apartment renovation



EMILY HAYS
@amihatt

4 MIN READ

Thursday, April 11, 2019, at 10:03 AM



Delma Buchanan, lifelong Belmont resident, stands outside the Belmont Apartments.

Credit: Emily Hays/Charlottesville Tomorrow

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Delma Buchanan takes care of her neighbors, whether that means driving a neighbor with a disability to the grocery store or allowing a depressed friend to sleep in her La-Z-Boy chair after a midnight talk. She said that it does her good and gives her something to do.

The idea of losing that strong community is part of why Buchanan, a lifelong Belmont resident, was so shocked and saddened to see that her month-to-month lease at the Belmont Apartments in Charlottesville is being terminated.

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“When I got this notice, the first thing I did was sit down, start crying and have a panic attack. It feels like you’re having a heart attack, and sweat just pours,” Buchanan said.

Buchanan said that she called her doctor and told him she really needed to see him.

“I could not drive, because I was afraid if I got in my car, I’d have a wreck. I was so jittery and out of it, so I got one of my neighbors to take me,” Buchanan said.

Buchanan said that she is one of 14 individuals and families in the apartments who were notified in March that their month-to-month leases will end on May 5. She said that, like her, approximately 10 were long-time residents of the buildings.

The apartment complex includes two two-story brick buildings at 1000 Monticello Road in the Belmont neighborhood. The Legal Aid Justice Center, which has offered to represent residents in case of eviction, met 13 residents through door-knocking, nine of whom said they had received notice to leave by May. The group of residents was racially diverse and most said that they lived on fixed incomes.



The Belmont Apartments were family-owned until 2018, when Core Real Estate purchased the property. This February, the apartment complex changed hands again when Piedmont Realty Holdings III LLC bought the property for \$2.75 million.

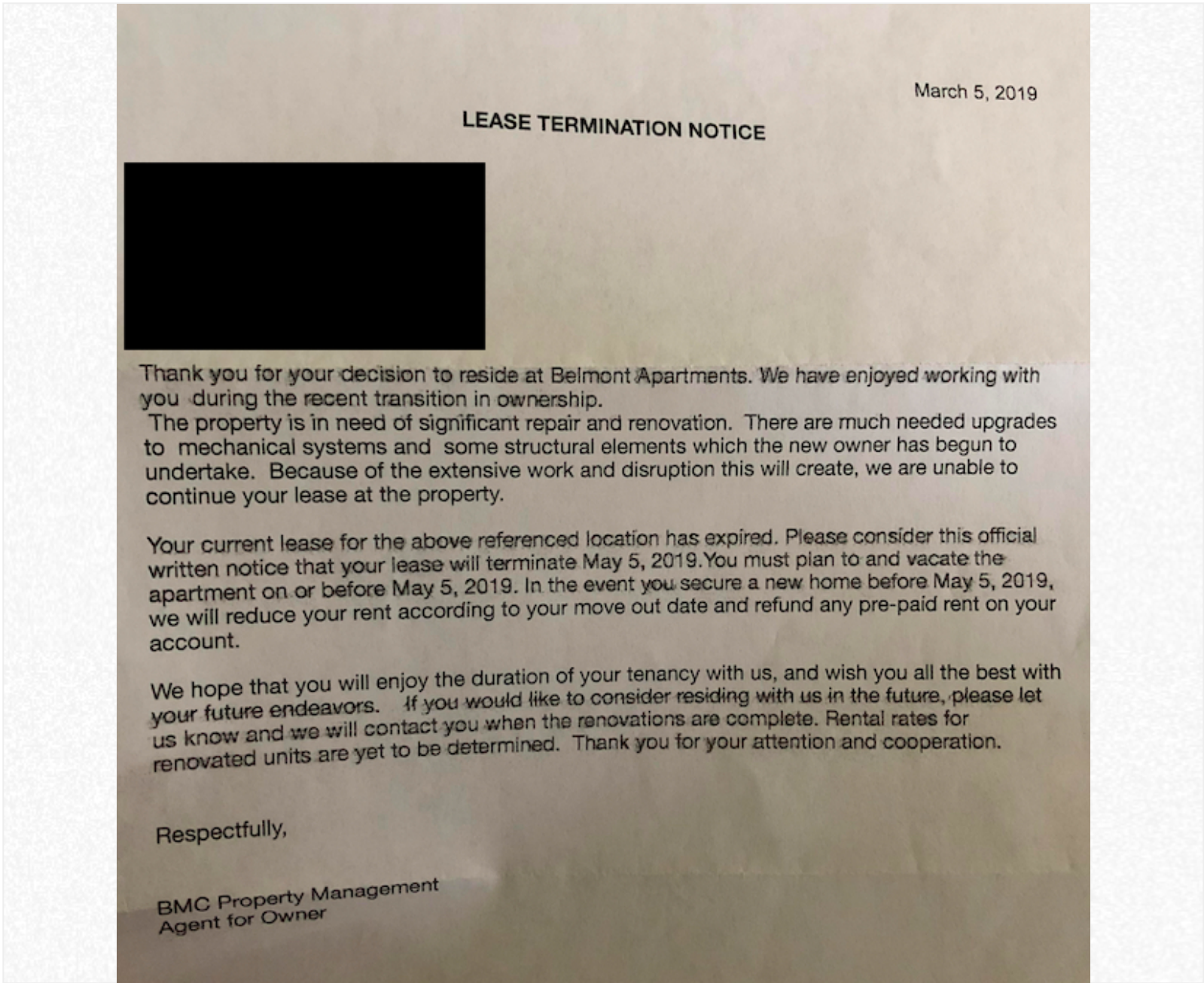
In a prepared statement, owner Drew Holzwarth said that he bought the apartment complex partially to provide necessary repairs.

“Unfortunately, the serious nature of the required repairs means that the work cannot be done while the apartments are occupied,” the statement said. “We hope the misinformation about our building can stop and people can begin to see this renovation for what it is — an effort to improve and repair a property desperately needing it.”

Buchanan agreed that her apartment needs maintenance. She said that her electricity bill climbed to almost \$300 last month because heat leaked out of the doors and windows.

Sarah Ballard, of BMC Property Management, which is managing the apartment complex, said that it is too soon to say what rents will be after the renovation, and it will depend on the costs of the repairs, which would include replacing windows.

“I think that’s everybody’s vision – that a landlord has more money than they do – but there are costs associated with being a landlord too. You have debt. You have an obligation to maintain a property,” Ballard said.



Some residents of the Belmont Apartments received lease termination notices on March 5.

Long-term residents like Buchanan rented the one- and two-bedroom apartments for between \$500 and \$800 a month.

According to a recent assessment of housing in the region, there’s a scarcity of such apartments in Charlottesville and Albemarle County. Study author Partners for Economic Solutions found the average rate of one-bedroom apartments was \$968 on Zillow and \$1,044 on Craigslist, based on searches conducted on Dec. 15, 2018.

There are few protections for tenants like Buchanan. The property owners are respecting existing leases, but many leases had expired in the transition between property owners.

Caroline Klosko, an attorney with Legal Aid who works on housing and criminal law, said that lawyers defending tenants have to focus on technicalities like the length of the notice period in eviction cases.

“You’re not directly addressing the root of housing problems in Charlottesville, which is that rents are skyrocketing, and people are being displaced. On the individual level, there just isn’t very much that you can do about that,” Klosko said.

Ballard said that residents should call her if they have concerns about the notices. She said that she has called other landlords to find housing options for one resident and wants to connect residents to community services.

“Communication is key with any project like this. We are all humans. We do not want anyone homeless,” Ballard said.

Buchanan has found an apartment that she is happy with. She likes her new landlord and said that the rent includes utilities, so her housing costs will stay approximately the same or decrease. Still, she said that rent is more than half of her monthly income and that it was the cheapest apartment she could find. She said that she hopes some of her neighbors will find places near her.

“I’m going on 73 years old, and who feels like moving? And then can’t get any help, you know?” Buchanan said.

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New Hill drafts plan to give Black Charlottesville reasons to stay



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11 MIN READ
Thursday, November 7, 2019, at 6:03 PM



Yolunda Harrell founded New Hill Development Corp. in 2018.

Credit: Charlotte Rene Woods/Charlottesville Tomorrow

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Gloria Beard said she wants to spend more time with her children, but none of her three sons want to live in Charlottesville anymore.

Beard is always cheerful, but she is not optimistic about her sons changing their minds. She said that they have found better jobs in Washington, D.C.; Ohio; and Florida with paychecks they can live on and activities that fit their interests. Another driver, Beard said, is the racism they experienced in Charlottesville.

“There was a lot of Black people once upon a time. The ones that haven’t passed away relocated. I think the younger ones, the ones that really wanted to make a change, left Charlottesville altogether,” she said.

At the end of the Civil War, Charlottesville and Albemarle County were majority African American. The count started to decline as African Americans across the South lost briefly won political rights and fled increasing violence by the Ku Klux Klan and others.

Even into the present, the number of African Americans who can or want to stay in Charlottesville seems to be decreasing. The 2010 census counted fewer Black residents of the city than in 2000 and a decrease in population share from 22% to 19%.

This pattern of relocation is part of what motivated Yolunda Harrell to start New Hill Development Corp. and propose a plan to guide future development of Charlottesville’s Starr Hill neighborhood. More than 10 years ago, Harrell moved to the city as a single Black woman with a job but no family or friends in the area.

“What makes me want to stay? If I cannot find a way to connect, if I do not see myself and my culture actively represented throughout the community in ways that I enjoy, then I am going to look to find that space someplace else,” Harrell said.

Monday evening, Harrell presented to the Charlottesville Council to make her case for how New Hill’s plan for Starr Hill can support housing, business and culture that would make someone like her want to stay.



**Starr Hill Neighborhood
Community Vision and
Small Area Plan
Concepts (draft)**
Credit: New Hill Development Corp.



Gloria Beard makes her way to the Charlottesville City Council meeting on Nov. 4.

Credit: Emily Hays/Charlottesville Tomorrow

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A different focus

The draft Starr Hill Neighborhood Community Vision and Small Area Plan Concepts is unique among the city’s draft and adopted small area plans in that it foregrounds Charlottesville’s African American community.

Small area plans look at all the ways a local government can affect a community, from roads to parks to housing. Rather than setting goals and strategies for an entire city or county, like Charlottesville’s Comprehensive Plan does, a small area plan focuses in on a neighborhood.

Other city small area plans have covered historically Black neighborhoods like Dice Street in Fifeville and Garrett Street in the southern downtown area, but they mention that history as background information with urban renewal as the reason for the street layout or fears of gentrification as reasons for distrust of predominantly white planning organizations.

New Hill, on the other hand, has been intentional throughout the process about the community it intends to serve. Several of its partner organizations are Black-run and the very first paragraph of the plan focuses on the ongoing effects of racism and economic exclusion felt within the community.

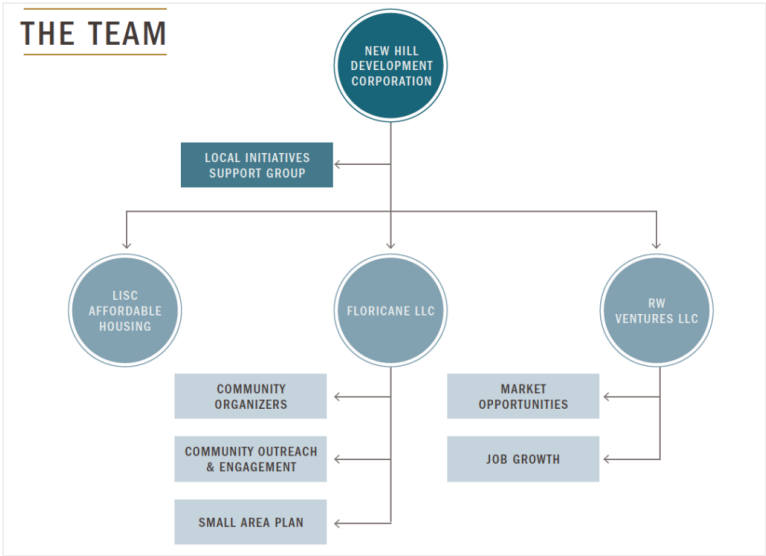
Harrell said that she hopes to serve the entire community by serving one segment well. Seeing the desire within the African American community to regain its footing, race had to be a focus, she said.

“In our work, it would be almost malpractice to not unearth the fact that race is a factor in these disparities and these gaps that we are attempting to address,” said Local Initiatives Support Corp. CEO Maurice Jones.

LISC is one of New Hill’s most powerful partners. The nonprofit has helped secure more than \$20 billion in investments in the last 40 years to cities and counties between Virginia Beach and Sonoma, California, according to its website.

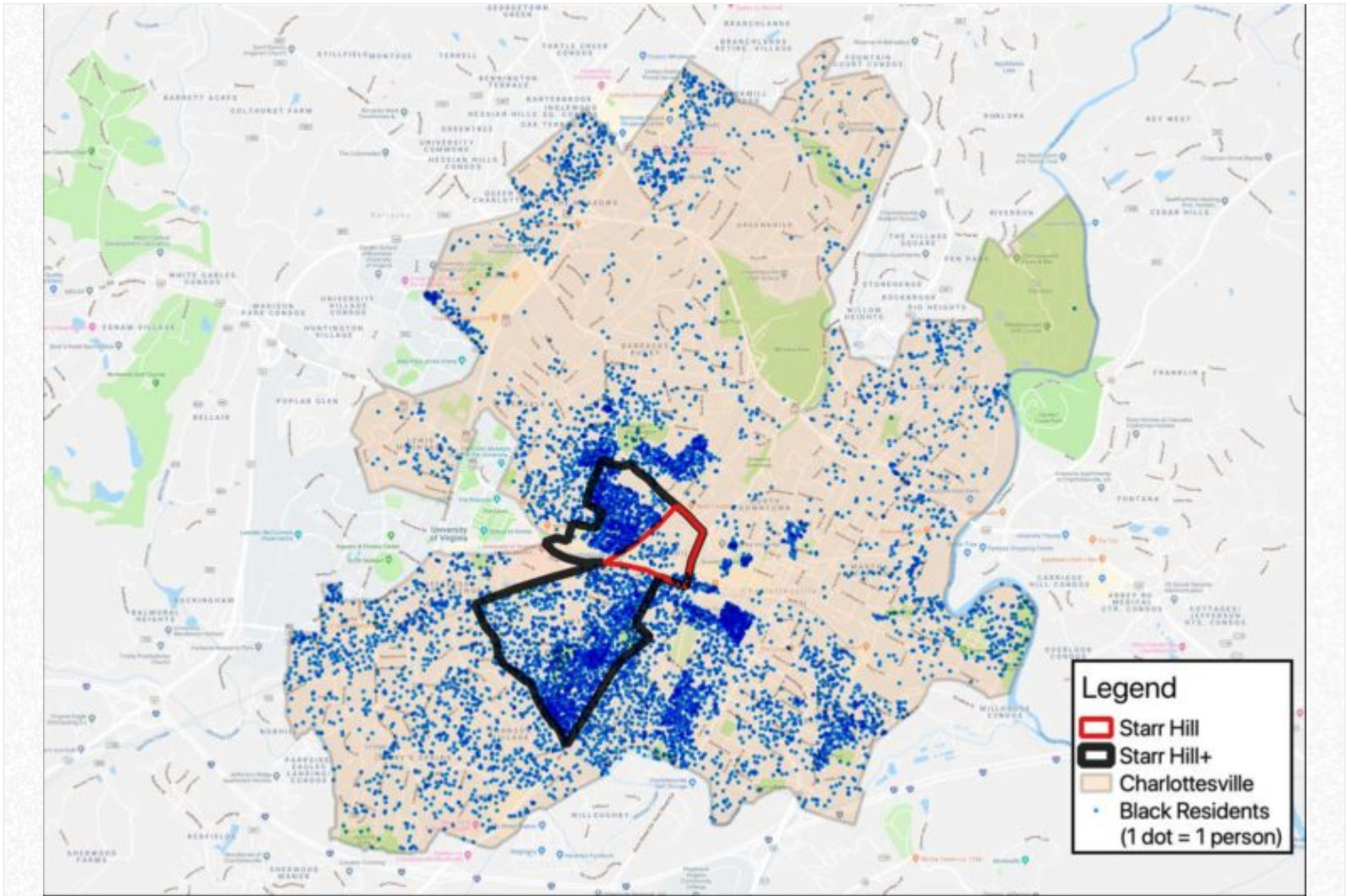
Jones said that LISC only gets involved in solving the most intractable wealth, employment and health disparities.

“If you look at the kind of planning that we do, you will see race every time,” Jones said.



In addition to Local Initiatives Support Corp, New Hill partnered with Floricane LLC for help with community engagement and the plan itself and RW Ventures LLC for economic insights.

Credit: New Hill Development Corp.



Charlottesville's Starr Hill neighborhood is located next to historically Black and integrated neighborhoods like Fifeville and 10th and Page.

Credit: New Hill Development Corp.

The process

Questions have swirled around the Starr Hill small area plan since it first became public knowledge.

New Hill received \$500,000 in city funding in late 2018, only half a year after the organization was established and before it was listed on the IRS website as a nonprofit. Starr Hill neighborhood leaders and longtime activists were unaware of the proposal before the city’s decision.

New Hill started its community engagement process this spring. The team hired Beard and about four others for \$20 an hour as community ambassadors to knock on the doors of residents and businesses. The team gathered feedback from community and one-on-one meetings and online surveys.

Harrell said that they also visited and studied notes from other forms of community engagement, like the citywide Dialogue on Race that began in 2009.

Harrell said that she has received both questions from residents about why she chose to start New Hill’s work in Starr Hill and from residents elsewhere about why she did not choose their neighborhoods. She said that she heard fears that she was bringing more high rises and unwanted development, but she worked to show the neighborhood that development was coming regardless, and this was the chance to make it benefit them.



Florican LLC helped New Hill hire community organizers, including 10th and Page resident Gloria Beard.

Credit: New Hill Development Corp.

“It’s not about us trying to do something to you but with you. Change is going to happen. Can we at least add our voice to how that change happens?” Harrell said.

Harrell said that New Hill chose Starr Hill because it was an area with large swaths of underutilized land, like the parking lot at Charlottesville Union Station and the Vinegar Hill Shopping Center. Unlike Fifeville, which has its [own small area plan](#) coming to the City Council soon, Starr Hill was not already under the microscope.



An example of street-level retail proposed for City Yard in the Starr Hill small area plan

Credit: New Hill Development Corp.

The plan

A large section of the neighborhood is owned by the city and is known as City Yard. This allowed New Hill to theorize possible uses for that land without upsetting anyone, Harrell said.

City Yard currently houses the city’s public works department. It is possible that the city could repurpose the 10-acre property and centralize all of its departments under one roof. However, City Manager Tarron Richardson said that the city has to analyze its existing spaces and needs first before embarking on such a project.

New Hill and its partners reimagined City Yard as a housing and business center. Based on neighborhood input, New Hill has proposed locating small-scale affordable housing on the Brown Street edge of the property. The 10 to 46 attached and detached homes would be targeted to first-time homebuyers and would integrate easily with the scale of the existing neighborhood.



New Hill Development Corp. and its partners reimagined City Yard as a housing and business center, with small-scale houses near Brown Street and apartments elsewhere.

Credit: New Hill Development Corp.

Other apartments would be located in four- to five-story buildings. Some of these buildings would include parking, office and retail space. The rent for these spaces would be affordable to promote small businesses needed in the neighborhood. One tenant would be a business incubator and coworking space that could serve as a hub for the city’s Black businesses.

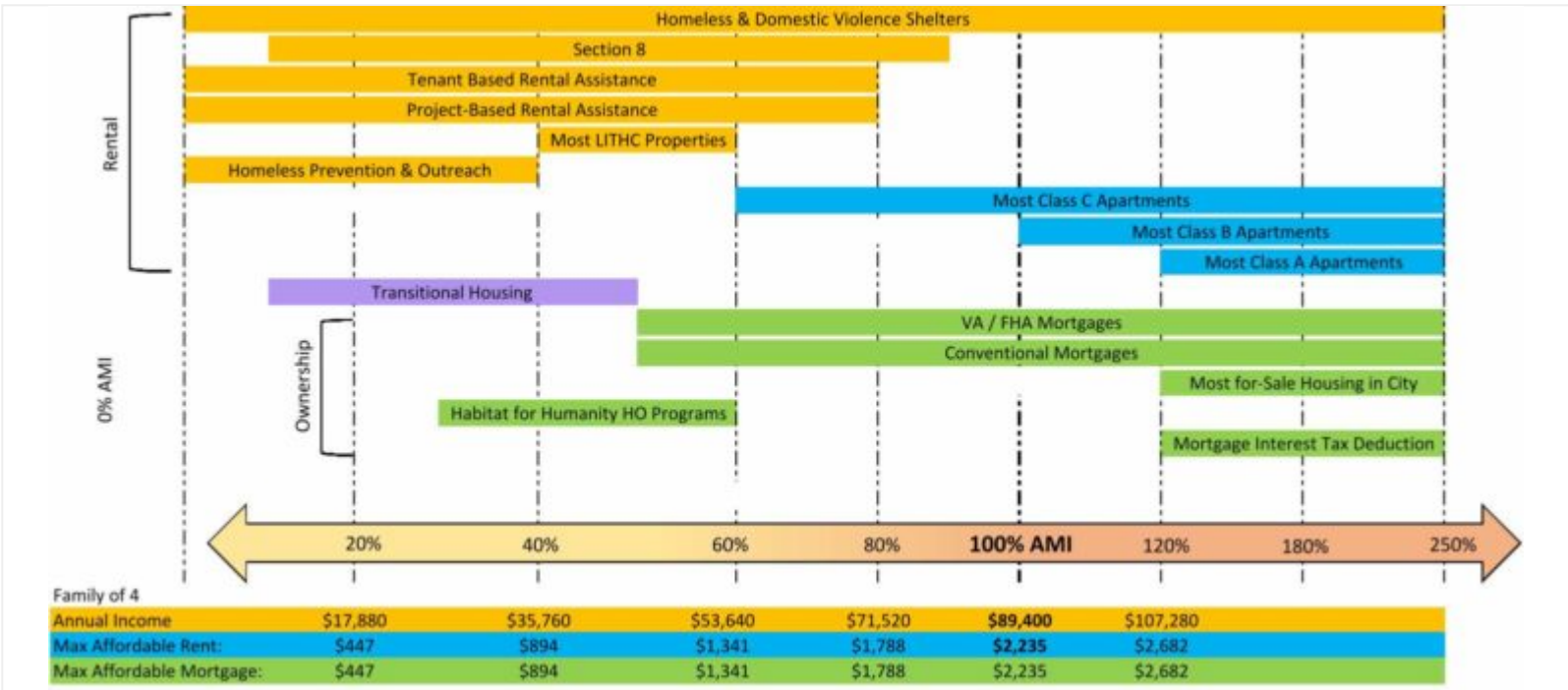
The past lives of City Yard could limit, but would not likely prevent, development, according to New Hill’s research. Gas for heating and lighting used to be produced in a plant on the property, and past studies have confirmed that the ground

has been contaminated.

However, the consultant responsible for the most recent study is cited in the plan as saying that this probably would not prevent residential development. The state has a remediation process to deal with

health risks and cleanup on sites like these that would take roughly 2½ years.

The plan also advocates for supporting a rail-to-trail project on the railroad line that crosses Preston Avenue and forms one of the edges of the City Yard property. The conversations for this project have already begun.



The Starr Hill small area plan identifies a gap in housing options for those in middle income tiers.

Credit: New Hill Development Corp.

To prevent change in the neighborhood from pricing some existing neighbors out, the plan suggests supporting existing tax offset efforts for elderly and low-income homeowners.

Housing on the City Yard property would be focused on households making 50% to 80% of area median income, which the New Hill team identified as a gap between subsidized and unsubsidized housing in the city. The median income for the Charlottesville area was about \$89,000 this year.

During the City Council discussion on the small area plan, Mayor Nikuyah Walker encouraged the team to consider extending the range of housing to lower income groups. Walker said that public housing primarily serves households making under 30% AMI and said that the gap starts above that income tier.

Another focus of the plan is the Jefferson School, a historic African American school that has now been converted into offices, a gym, a restaurant and the Jefferson School African American Heritage Center.

The small area plan proposes adding two levels of parking to the Jefferson School’s parking garage and adding a green roof and walls to the new structure. The plan also proposes new landscaping, like an outdoor performance space, to further emphasize and support the Heritage Center’s key role in the community.

A public plaza in the current Staples parking lot would reconnect the school building to the Downtown Mall. Many connections that used to exist at that location were severed when the city decided to raze the historic African-American neighborhood and business district Vinegar Hill.



The Starr Hill small area plan proposes building an outdoor performance space to further emphasize and support the Jefferson School African American Heritage Center’s key role in the community.

Credit: New Hill Development Corp.

Art exhibits by Black artists throughout the inside of the Jefferson School would extend the building’s ability to tell its story beyond the walls of the Heritage Center.

Harrell said that the plan is not the solution to inequitable development and wealth-building in the community but it does show the broader community what can be done and how to hold opportunities open for those who have been marginalized.



A celebration of Juneteenth outside the Jefferson School African American Heritage Center

Credit: Ézé Amos/Charlottesville Tomorrow

Next steps

The Charlottesville City Council meeting kicked off the city’s process of deciding whether to adopt the Starr Hill small area plan into its Comprehensive Plan.

On Monday, the council seemed supportive of adopting the small area plan. At the next meeting, the council plans to initiate a Comprehensive Plan amendment, which would start a 120-day countdown. During that time, city departments would review New Hill’s plan and provide comments on whether anything should change in the plan. After New Hill incorporates the feedback, the plan would go to the Charlottesville Planning Commission for a public hearing on whether to adopt the plan. The last step, which can occur after 120 days, would be a City Council vote.

Harrell said that some steps in the plan can begin before city adoption. Harrell suggested affordable homeownership on the edge of City Yard as one of those steps and expanded support for small businesses as another.

LISC plans to get more involved in Charlottesville in the future, too. During Monday’s meeting, Jones said that LISC could help secure the funding and investments to make the projects happen.



LISC’s usual next step is to put together or join a coalition of diverse partners. Interested partners can contact Harrell, who is the local point person, Jones said in an interview.

“We’re excited about trying to make sure that Charlottesville as it continues to grow and as it

The Starr Hill area plan proposes holding monthly food truck and entertainment events in front of the Jefferson School.

Credit: New Hill Development Corp.

continues to produce prosperity, that more and more and more and more people will be able to share in that prosperity,” Jones said.

“Charlottesville is a place that can achieve that with some serious teamwork. We would be very interested in being part of that team.”

Beard anticipates that the changes she would like to see in Charlottesville will take some time. She lives in the 10th and Page neighborhood but she frequented Vinegar Hill as a child and came back to African American cultural events at the Jefferson School as an adult. She would like to see an expansion of that kind of programming and space for both youth and elders.

“I have my home here. I want to stay in this house as long as I can,” Beard said. “I hate to even think about relocating. If I were younger, it would be something different.”

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PUBLIC EDUCATION, LAND USE + PLANNING

UVa offers local community control with new equity center



EMILY HAYS
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7 MIN READ
Friday, October 11, 2019, at 6:00 AM



University of Virginia Equity Center faculty director Dayna Matthew (left) and community director Karen Waters-Wicks

Credit: Zack Wajsglas/Charlottesville Tomorrow

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Dayna Bowen Matthew wants to get universities back to their original purpose, as she sees it, and the University of Virginia officially is on board.

On Friday, UVa announced a new center called the Democracy Initiative Center for the Redress of Inequity Through Community-Engaged Scholarship — or, the Equity Center.

The new center aims to repair economic and racial inequity by changing the way university researchers operate through putting their resources at the service of community questions and needs.

“Our resources as a public institution are for this very purpose — to make society better, to make society more just, to make it more fair, to make it more equal. This is an important way in which we

serve the very essence of what it means to be a public university,” said Matthew, who will serve as the faculty director of the center.

Matthew studies racial disparities in public health and is affiliated with the UVa School of Law. Matthew founded the center alongside Nancy Deutsch, of the Curry School of Education; Bonnie Gordon, of the College of Arts and Sciences; and Barbara Brown Wilson, of the School of Architecture.

As important as the founders are, they see the center’s community partners as equally important and have attempted to build that equality into the structure of the new center.

The Equity Center is launching with five key initiatives, each led by at least one community director and at least one faculty director. Some initiatives focus on supporting community programs that are already addressing systemic inequities, while some focus more specifically on the university’s role in those inequities.

One initiative that has come up in recent weeks at a Charlottesville Redevelopment and Housing Authority meeting is the creation of a Community Research Review Board, which would be a community-led partner to the university board that signs off on research proposals.

The Public Housing Association of Residents started the idea as an antidote to continuous exposure to researchers that they had no control over and saw few direct benefits from. Residents of the public housing site Westhaven have counted researchers from up to 28 different projects knocking on their doors per semester.

“Truth be told, UVa has not been a very good neighbor to the community. That’s just the reality. There’s so much more that needs to be done and that can be done,” said Don Gathers, a deacon at First Baptist Church and co-founder of Charlottesville Black Lives Matter.

Gathers is a community director with Matthew on an initiative studying how structural racism and poverty affect health, safety, wealth and education outcomes.

The Equity Center’s first focus is on working with African American, Latino, immigrant, low-income and other minority groups in the neighborhoods next to the university.

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Knitting together



Daniel Fairley, the city of Charlottesville's first youth opportunity coordinator.

Credit: Zack Wajsgras/The Daily Progress

Many of the Equity Center initiatives build on relationships and partnerships that have been going on for years between community leaders and university professors. The change is in how the university supports that work.

“This is Barbara’s language, so she probably already said it. We’re knitting together things that have been around,” Gordon said.

Gordon was sitting at a table at the new Farm Bell Kitchen on West Main Street with Wilson, Deutsch and Susan Kools, of the School of Nursing. Over the course of an hour, Gathers joined the table with fellow community directors Daniel Fairley, Charlene Green and Karen Waters-Wicks.

Although the topic of discussion was the launch of the Equity Center, its existence also came down to the individuals involved.

“For me, it’s really the trust that I have in Dayna and Nancy and Barbara and Susan and Bonnie,” Fairley said. “If that wasn’t there, then I wouldn’t have joined, because I’ve heard about things like this before.”

Fairley is the city’s youth opportunity coordinator focused on Black male achievement. Fairley said that he had been working with Deutsch since he started in his position in late 2017.

Fairley is now co-directing the Equity Center’s youth pipeline program with Gordon, Deutsch and three other community directors, including Tamara Wright, who has helped the Charlottesville Food Justice Network create a low-income food justice leadership cohort.

The center’s national advisory board includes luminaries like housing human rights activist Willie J.R. Fleming and Richard Reeves who studies class and inequality at the Brookings Institution.

Fleming, for example, has helped advise the new center on what works and does not work in community partnerships elsewhere — is the university providing equal wages to university and community researchers or providing stipends that allow community members to take time off from the rest of their work.

“I’ve worked over the years with many faculty who venture off grounds to do community work, and to see it happen institution-wide is a great shift that I largely attribute to President Ryan’s leadership and the leadership of the equity center,” Waters-Wicks said.

Waters-Wicks is on PHAR’s advisory board, works in the community education department for the Albemarle County Public Schools and is an adjunct faculty member at Piedmont Virginia Community College. Waters-Wicks also is on the Equity Center’s national advisory board.

A wake-up call



Community organizer Don Gathers stands next to his portrait during the “Inside Out: This Is What Community Looks Like!” photography installation that commemorated Charlottesville activism two years after Aug. 2017.

Credit: Charlotte Rene Woods/Charlottesville Tomorrow

Matthew has found that UVa professors and students came to the school to do good. When UVa graduates organized the white supremacist rallies on Aug. 11 and 12, 2017, it made many at the university realize that they can give students better tools to make a more just society.

“I think it was a wakeup call to find out that we in the past have educated white supremacists, who go out and do evil,” Matthew said.

When Jim Ryan became UVa president a year ago, he formed a University-Community Working Group to determine priorities for university action to heal its relationship with Charlottesville and surrounding counties.

One of the recommendations in the group’s [report](#) was to establish an equity institute “to infuse principles of accountability and responsible community partnership throughout the university.”

The president’s office, the university’s Democracy Initiative and several university colleges have funded the Equity Center for three years. The founders hope to fundraise to make that funding last five. At the same time, they hope to convince the university that the center would be viable as a permanent institute.

Matthew said that the center hopes to create formal incentives to encourage the community-engaged scholarship that the founding faculty members have already been working in. However, she said there is already extensive buy-in from faculty and she doesn’t think they need much more of a push.

The Equity Center plans to launch formally on Nov. 14 and 15.

The first day would be full of “FAFSA parties” in the community, where the university works with local youth organizations to help potential students fill out financial aid paperwork through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid and get their college applications done.

The second day would be a public dinner at a location easily accessible to the community, hosted to thank community partners and all the years of work that led to this moment.

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Emily Hays grew up in Charlottesville and graduated from Yale in 2016. She covers growth, development, and affordable living. Before writing for Charlottesville Tomorrow, she produced a podcast on education and caste in Maharashtra, India.

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