

# news & features



SCOTT ELMQUIST

## No Fly Zone

Dockless scooters promise mobility for all, but recent restrictions limit their operation in Gilpin Court.

by David Streever

**D**errick Gregory doesn't drive to work. The North Side resident commutes to his information-technology job downtown by bike, bus or until recently, an e-scooter. His last trip ended at East Baker and North First streets, where the scooter slowed to a stop.

"As soon as I turned the corner from Duval, onto the bridge going over 95, the scooter started slowing down," Gregory says.

He didn't know what had happened until he looked at the app on his phone:

He'd entered a restricted zone, a geofenced region in which the Bolt company doesn't allow its scooters to operate.

"The app told me I had to move the scooter out of the zone immediately," he says.

He didn't realize he was supposed to manually resume the ride and tried to drag it back to the bridge. This caused another problem. "They have these speakers, and it started saying it would call the police. I couldn't leave it, I couldn't drag it. I felt stuck."

He was able to resume the app and

ride the scooter out of the zone, but it took several tries, leaving him frustrated and stressed out. "There was no warning, no prior information."

According to customer support, restricted areas appear shaded in red on the Bolt app map. But on a weekend afternoon two weeks later, a reporter found

**An abandoned Bolt scooter sits in Gilpin Court.**

**The company has an internal policy of leaving a third of its scooters in low-income neighborhoods, but it has seen more vandalism and damage to its scooters in Richmond than any other city.**

the app still showed Gilpin Court as open, marked in green, despite the restriction. Just as it did for Gregory, the scooter shut down at Baker Street. One other person trying to ride in Gilpin, a local man who asked to be quoted as Ernest M., says the problems are recent and have made it harder for

him to get around.

"I use it when I need to," he says. He doesn't own a car, and sometimes needs to run last-minute errands that don't line up with the bus schedule. He finds the restriction frustrating, but doesn't blame Bolt.

"I'm not trying to be too blunt or blame anybody, but I see some people abusing them in this neighborhood," he says. "They can't come out and say it, but I think they think black folks can't be trusted with them. Of course they're going to punish us for that. It's not fair but that's life."

Ernest says he's seen crimes committed by scooter, petty and serious, and witnessed a lot of vandalism of the devices. Some of those incidents have made it to social media, such as a recent burning of scooters filmed in Gilpin Court and placed on YouTube. Other incidents, like a drive-by paintball gun shooting that left a man blind, have been perpetrated by riders.

According to reporting by Mark Robinson in The Richmond Times-Dispatch, the company has seen more vandalism in Richmond than in any other city, with a third of its scooters taken out of commission. Speaking on condition of ano-

**Scooters on page 8**

### **Scooters** *from page 7*

nymity, a Bolt representative confirmed it had restricted operation in Gilpin Court, citing threats to employees who pick up scooters for repairs and charging. The restricted zone begins at Baker Street and ends as far away as South Barton Heights near Tybee Terrace, three-quarters of a mile away.

Although the company made the decision to restrict the scooters, Bolt is working with Richmond police and the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority to curb vandalism and other issues. It described the current restrictions as part of a broader investigation, and the representative said it hopes to lift them soon. As part of that effort, Bolt staff took a walking tour of Gilpin Court with the housing authority's chief executive, Damon Duncan, and the Richmond police, talking to residents about the scooters and other neighborhood issues.

While some cities have mandated equity agreements, formalized contracts to make scooters accessible to low-income residents, Richmond has no such formal agreement with Bolt. Rather, the company has an internal policy of leaving one-third of all scooters in lower-income neighborhoods. Recent comparisons between the Bolt map and census data for household income suggest the company is keeping to this policy.

Still, restricting the scooters from a large housing complex doesn't fit in with statements by Mayor Levar Stoney that the e-scooters could serve all residents by filling a last-mile transportation gap between bus stops and homes. In the case of Gilpin Court, the restrictions have a double impact, affecting both that community and residents in North Side, like Gregory, who commute through the neighborhood to downtown.

While it was an inconvenience for him, Gregory is concerned about disparate impacts on others, saying, "I'm not naive to the fact that I was in a public housing complex."

Bolt says it's committed to the city, although vandalism and restricted zones are only the latest challenges to dockless scooters in Richmond.

The city charges Bolt \$45,000 per year to operate here, making it the highest annual fee for such a company in the country. Although data from Bolt suggests the scooters are wildly popular all over the city, Gregory says the company has lost him as a customer.

"I'm not confident that they'll go where I want to go now," he says. Although he was able to get through Gilpin eventually, it wasn't convenient. "I go through that part of town for work and it's basically my only reason for using them." **S**



# news & features



SCOTT ELMQUIST

## Eviction City

Organizers behind a Richmond coalition call for officials to address the needs of displaced public housing residents.

by David Streever

If Navy Hill is built, expect displacement and evictions to rise, say organizers with Richmond for All, coalition formed last year to protest inadequate heat for hundreds of public housing residents. Now its fighting public housing evictions and Navy Hill, the proposed \$1.5 billion dollar megaproject that would require public financing through an 80-block tax increment financing zone downtown.

Nearly a hundred activists gather in front of City Hall before a Nov. 12 City Council meeting to protest Navy Hill. Among the crowd are many of the same activists who rallied in front of the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority headquarters in January and

who mobilized to fight evictions of as many as one in eight Creighton Court residents recently.

Omari Al-Qadafi, a longtime public housing organizer, says that Navy Hill is part of a long-standing plan by the housing authority to demolish public housing.

"The plan was formulated by [former authority chief executive] T.K. Somanath, and he's the affordable housing consultant for Navy Hill," Al-Qadafi says. He points to the recent evictions in Creighton Court as phase one. "They think they're going to redevelop Creighton Court first, so the evictions and vacancy

rates are highest there."

In a statement, the authority's chief executive, Damon Duncan, disputes that the vacancy rate was part of a plan to demolish Creighton, and takes issue with the term evictions, noting that residents were in court for "unlawful detainers." Unlawful detainers are the court orders tenants are served after eviction notifications and before execution of the writs of possession that remove them from their homes.

However, according to an agency plan, the authority is planning to demolish Creighton Court. Residents will be sent to new mixed-income apartment complexes like Armstrong Renaissance with project-based vouchers. About Armstrong, Al-Qadafi says, "It's a high percentage of single-family apartments. They don't want families." He expects affordable housing units at Navy Hill to also favor single people, pushing families out.

Navy Hill didn't have a statement on apartment sizes by time of publication, but a representative says it will build 200 units of affordable housing available through vouchers and dedicate \$150 million in projected revenues to housing and homelessness services. Critics call that projection speculative and note it's a non-binding commitment that can be freely revoked.

"They'll thrust black families into a real market that discriminates against them," says Al-Qadafi about the vouchers. A city anti-poverty report from 2013 agrees. Al-Qadafi quoted from that report at an authority meeting July 17: "Relying on vouchers as a primary means of providing housing in Richmond perpetuates the racially-concentrated areas of poverty

we are federally mandated to decrease."

Richard Meagher, an associate professor of political science at Randolph-Macon College, describes the mixed-income apartment plans on his blog,

RVA Politics, as "a middle finger from the city's elites." He says the plan was lifted from Duncan's strategy at his last job, in Elgin, Illinois, which the Daily Herald described as "the end of public housing."

Evictions on page 8

### Evictions from page 7

While this approach is better for a city's bottom line, Meagher writes that it will increase homelessness and hurt families.

Richmond for All organizers are calling for one-to-one brick-and-mortar replacement, among them Kristin Reed and Jasmine Leeward, organizers of the anti-Navy Hill rally. Reed also attended the July 17 authority meeting, where she addressed Duncan, quoting comments attributed to him.

"[He said] we do not implement people plans, we are a real estate development company," Reed says. "[But] you are not a real estate development company. You are not a company. You are a publicly funded agency, tasked with the just stewardship of public resources in the support of our most vulnerable people."

Like Al-Qaddafi, Reed says that Navy Hill will take tax money away from priorities like public housing and schools. She describes it as the vanity project of one man: Dominion Energy's chief executive, Thomas F. Farrell II. He heads the NH District Corp. nonprofit that proposed Navy Hill. "This RFP was designed for one bidder. We won't know what's possible on the site without a good faith RFP," she adds.

Reed isn't interested in alternatives or compromises when it comes to Navy Hill.

"We're not looking to renegotiate the plan, we oppose it," she says, rejecting public financing. Leeward agrees. "This is a 30-year protection scheme for corporations. There is a lot of development in Richmond already. TIFs aren't for cities that are growing like Richmond," she says, noting that they're often used to fund public projects like city halls, parks and libraries.

Both were hopeful about the Navy Hill Development Advisory Commission, appointed by City Council. At a recent meeting, its vice chairman, John Gerner, raised issues with the projections. Gerner, the managing director of Leisure Business Advisers, says the city would have to take on \$300 million in bonds for the coliseum portion of Navy Hill, and estimated that new revenue from the 80-block area the financing district encompasses would take 28 years to pay off the bond. For Richmond Magazine, Rodrigo Arriaza wrote that Gerner described himself as an adviser with a duty to highlight the risks. Gerner is quoted as saying there are no guarantees, and "if there are unexpected changes that we don't know about, ultimately, that money's at risk, too."

Despite rumors that some members of the commission are there to support Navy Hill, Reed says the information that's come out of the meetings to date

convinces her the final report will be negative. She also ranks as a positive the recent election of Stephanie Lynch to the 5th District City Council seat. She thinks Lynch will vote no on the development: "She described it as reckless." She cites Lynch, a local social worker, as an ally against public-housing evictions.

"I've worked with families in the big six courts," Lynch says later, by phone, describing evictions as devastating. For a first step, she's looking for data. "We need all the information in one easy-to-see dashboard." When it comes to specifics, she'll work with housing activists

to make sure council has the information it needs to assess public housing issues.

When it comes to one-for-one brick and mortar versus voucher systems, Lynch says more data is needed there, too, on what residents want.

"We need to take a resident-centric view," she explains. "But there must be an option for every resident." She also advises oversight and caution if the city implements vouchers.

"We should be careful where we're sending people. There are predatory landlords and property managers. We need to compile a list of bad actors."

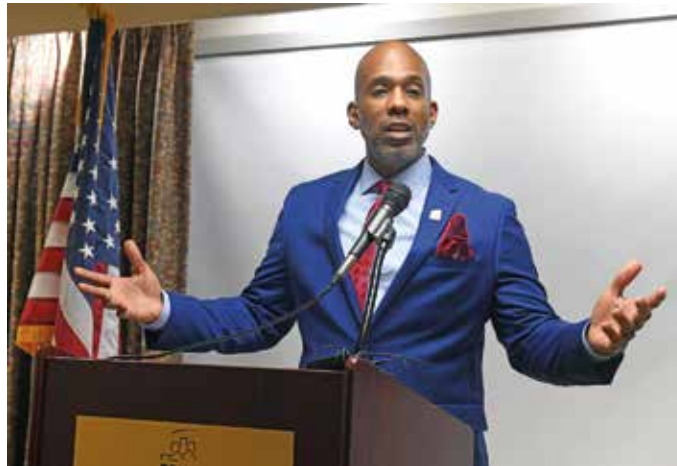
All of that comes down to engaging residents. "They are a vulnerable population. There is a power imbalance between the authority and the residents we have to be aware of," she says. As a social worker, she's seen how fears of retaliation can silence vulnerable populations.

Letting residents comment anonymously is crucial, Lynch says. One possibility: Placards with QR codes residents can scan to give feedback. "Seventy-three percent of people in public housing have smartphones, and even older phones can scan QR codes. And we can also distribute paper surveys at the courts, too."

Time's on her side. After a judge dismissed the cases, Duncan announced an agency-wide freeze on evictions until January and a re-evaluation of debt-collection practices Nov. 8. The next week, Mayor Levar Stoney announced a task force to bolster the work of his eviction-diversion program, which took effect on July 1 and will include Duncan.

The eviction freeze is a victory, Al-Qaddafi says, but for next steps, he believes the city should implement plans it's already adopted. "I just wish they'd follow the recommendations of the 2013 city anti-poverty commission. The report doesn't call for an arena or a transfer station," he says. Instead, it calls for what he's asking for: one-to-one brick and mortar replacement and renovation of existing public housing stock, without displacement, accomplished through a resident-centric process.

Or, as he wrote in a Facebook post after the freeze was announced: "A small battle has been won. The fight to put people over profit continues." **S**



**The housing authority's new chief executive, Damon Duncan, pictured during a news conference from April.**

SCOTT ELMQUIST/FILE



# news & features



wealth University graduate who majored in political science, is 21 and works as an Uber Eats driver. Following the murder of Heather Heyer, he had his first experience of mutual aid, or people working together to collective benefit. It's a leftist alternative to charity, which many socialists see as a patronizing neoliberal practice, and it forms the core of his candidacy and organizing. He's put the theory into practice as chairman of VCU's Young

**Fifth District City Council candidate Nicholas Da Silva talks to prospective voter Chris Walsh while canvassing Randolph on Saturday, Aug. 17.**

Democratic Socialists of America, organizing a free brake lights clinic, a movement within the party to prevent police contact by fixing broken tail lights, with local activist Ulysses

Carter. And he hopes to bring that spirit to city government.

If Charlottesville brought him to the Democratic Socialists and leftism, it was the police shooting death of high school teacher Marcus-David Peters in May 2018 that motivated Da Silva to run. He draws a line from Unite the Right to Peters.

"Systemic racism kills people too, just in less flashy ways. The same thing that killed Heather Heyer killed Marcus-David Peters," he says.

Da Silva had already been attending Richmond City Council meetings, and his sense that city officials were ineffective and disengaged only grew after Peters' death. He was stunned by the silence from people in power.

"All these people, who presumably have opinions, aren't talking," he says. "I decided to run for office so I can talk about these things. Someone has to. How else can progress be made?"

Police accountability forms one of the five pillars of Da Silva's platform, which he says was derived from community conversations he's had over the last two years. The other priorities are housing and tenant empowerment, funding for public schools, food and transportation justice and economic empowerment. It's a platform that resembles those of other Democratic Socialists such as Sen. Bernie Sanders, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-

**Da Silva on page 8**

## The New School

A Democratic Socialist candidate for City Council comes knocking.

by David Streever

**I**t was on the streets of Charlottesville on Aug. 12, 2017, that 5th District council candidate Nicholas Da Silva had his political awakening.

"You don't end up at A12 not being politically involved, but that was a clarifying moment," he says, using a colloquial term for the events of that day. As the carnage erupted, it wasn't the Democratic Party supporting the anti-racist protest against the Unite the Right rally, he says, but leftist groups such as the Democratic Socialists of America and the International Workers of the World.

Da Silva recalls marching through the city making sure people were OK, when his group got word that the white supremacists had mostly dispersed. They crested a hill and joined another group of counterprotesters.

"It felt great. We were marching up the street together and then the car just came out of nowhere. I remember the screeching of the tires, the horrible sound of the metal," he collects himself, reliving the trauma. "Then, holy shit, I'm sorry but I saw it, they killed that woman."

Da Silva, a recent Virginia Common-

SCOTT ELMQUIST

**Da Silva** *from page 7*

Cortez and, closer to home, Delegate Lee Carter, for whom Da Silva interned after seeing opposition flyers about the then-candidate.

“It was like, socialism evil, bad! I saw that and thought, I have to check this guy out,” he says, laughing. In the General Assembly, he saw public corruption and revenge politics first-hand.

“They didn’t like [Carter],” he says, noting that Democrats and Republicans alike killed his bills with no discussion in committee. “Even a bill against hitting people in a crosswalk.”

Like Ocasio-Cortez and Carter, Da Silva is active on social media, live-tweeting council meetings and engaging with residents. Between his policies and his presence, he’s even picked up endorsements from figures like Stafford NAACP President Joshua Cole, the Democratic candidate for Virginia’s 28th House District.

Asked if his age has been a hindrance, he says it hasn’t.

“If it comes up, it’s at the end of a genuine conversation,” he says, mostly with a sense of surprise that someone his age is so involved. Da Silva tends to see the positive in everything, and even finds an upside here. “Most members have other jobs,” he says, noting the pressures of mortgages, children and careers. “But if I’m elected, I’m going to do this full time. I have four roommates. I can live on \$25,000 a year.”

On a recent South Side canvas, Da Silva’s age only comes up twice, when potential voters describe him as a “fresh voice.” In a stylish floral Hawaiian shirt, the candidate fields serious questions and concerns as varied as his ability to represent a district split by the James River, petty theft, potholes and the proposed \$1.5 billion Navy Hill development and coliseum.

It’s at the door of a retired sculptor, though, that Da Silva finds the type of conversation that makes or breaks a City Council member: A detailed discussion on the flood plan for Reedy Creek, which flows into Dunston Street.

As Da Silva takes notes, the potential voter apologizes.

“I don’t know if this is the stuff you’re interested in. Are you sorry you knocked yet?”

“No, I like this,” Da Silva says. “I was just telling my friends, one of the best parts of this is I have an excuse to knock on everyone’s doors and meet thousands of my neighbors. It’s a treat.”

After the half-hour conversation, Da Silva gives him some campaign literature.

“If there’s anything else, anything at all, reach out to us, we’ll get back to you.” **S**