

## The Public Ought to Know: City must redirect funds to address housing issues

By Corey Bearak 07/31/2003



Corey Bearak

A funny thing happened at a breakfast that my congressman, Greg Meeks (D-St. Albans), hosted for civic leaders who lived in his 6th Congressional District. Ruth Bryan, a civic leader from Southeast Queens Concerned Neighbors who also is active in the Queens Civic Congress, raised concerns that developers plan hotels that do not end up serving visitors and tourists, due to her community's proximity to JFK Airport. Instead, they end up being congregate housing — shelters — for homeless individuals and families.

I remarked to Community Board 13 chairman and Bellerose neighbor Rich Hellenbrecht that my next column would address affordable housing. After all, I worked on two sound plans in the last couple of years, one released and one based on the earlier that merited release.

When I got home and decided to at least start my commentary, I brought up the document that lists my "column ideas." I pulled up the search key and typed in "housing," but inexplicably it never made the list. So we have Meeks and Bryan to thank for this week's column.

Homelessness became very real for me when then-Mayor Ed Koch decided to use an empty building at Creedmoor Psychiatric Center to house homeless adults during the winter of 1983 to 1984. Before that, homelessness for me was something I saw on the tube or when I drove through nabes such as the Lower East Side. The site was across the street from a school and a Little League complex. The community rose in uproar.

The city's record was poor in managing its shelter system, with no hope and the virtual absence of services for those within it, which exacerbated community concerns. With our elected officials working together and disregarding political animosities existing within and across party lines, a good outcome resulted: Operated by Catholic Charities, the RCCA (pronounced "rock-ah"), or Residential Care Center for Adults, replaced the usual congregate shelter. It includes services to help residents lift themselves out of homelessness.

As I continued in government, homelessness grew as an issue; it also cost a lot to house families and individuals without shelter. Models of transitional housing with comprehensive on-site services arose, including HELP USA (formerly called H.E.L.P. — Housing Enterprise for the Less Privileged), founded by Andrew Cuomo, and Homes for the Homeless, founded by philanthropist Leonard Stern.

Transitional housing instead became the new homeless shelters. The city essentially warehoused growing numbers of families and adults who lost their homes as the economy weakened.

The issue returned as last winter approached. Mayor Mike Bloomberg sought to place homeless families in the closed Bronx House of Detention — a jail a few blocks from the city's only emergency intake center on Walton Avenue, within blocks of Yankee Stadium. Homeless advocates sued to block the plan and the mayor released an affordable housing plan, partially to defuse the outcry.

Homelessness did not just rise during an economic downturn. Last fall Housing First noted that total housing development varied between 8,000 and 14,000 units annually over the past five years. This compared with an average of more than 30,000 units per year in the 1960s. A 1999 Citizens Housing and Planning Council analysis indicated a potential shortfall of 225,000 units.

The need may be greater. The 1999 Housing and Vacancy Survey found 203,000 unfit rentals and 137,000 households living doubled-up. About 9,000 families and 8,000 individuals live in temporary or emergency housing. The city needs 20,000 vacant apartments to raise the housing vacancy rate above the 5 percent level that would remove the housing emergency required for rent regulation. This means the shortfall in affordable housing units may exceed 375,000.

While the need exists for more affordable housing, it also gives policymakers a more cost-effective alternative to the shelter-system money pit. In March 2002 the Independent Budget Office reported the city spends more than \$600 million a year on emergency shelter alone.

We need 130,000 new units of affordable housing and to preserve existing affordable housing, including private and non-profit units facing physical neglect or financial distress and Mitchell-Lama, Section 8 and other subsidies. To specifically address short-term homelessness, we need 3,000 housing units with support services for homeless families and about 15,000 for homeless individuals, including those who are mentally ill or are substance abusers.

We should fund the supportive housing and homeless prevention outreach by redirecting \$33,000 in minimum annual savings realized by moving homeless individuals from the shelter system. Using subsidies for permanent rentals (\$9,000 for a family of three annually) saves \$29,000 to fund permanent housing.

For construction, shift about \$2 billion in the capital budget for jails and shelters to build housing.

**Look for a future column to talk specifics on housing financing and development.**

Corey Bearak is an attorney and adviser on government, community and public affairs. He is also active in Queens civic and political circles.

*©Times-Ledger 2003*