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RON HERNDON SPEAKS: Displacement Hits Community Once Again

Ron Herndon Speaks is a series feature of the Portland Observer. In this installment, Herndon, a community leader and activist, talked with correspondent Yugen Fardan Rashad on a number of topics.

Yugen: Please speak on imminent domain, and its historic impact on Portland's low-income residents, particularly communities of color. Business entities and developers draw up plans for expansion that often change the landscape and disperse folks into other areas to live. The expansion plan of Portland Community College seems to have affected the ability of Renaissance Market to remain open. Operators of the store indicate negotiations with Portland Community College hit a snag, but are on-going.

Herndon: You have black institutions that have served the

community well, such as the church (Albina Christian Life Center), Renaissance Market, and Head Start. These institutions are helpful to a number of people and families in this community. We've had a great relationship with the college and students over many years. And I think it's unfortunate now that PCC says it has a better use for the property in the surrounding area.

It's hard enough to establish institutions in our community. Then to be told you have to pull up stakes for the 'good of society'.

Where I work (Head Start) it's very disappointing. We've had a facility located on the PCC Cascade campus since the eighties. When they (PCC) begin discussions about expansion, we were told we would be part of the plan. And now we get told (2001) we're

When property values fall, speculators come in who have access to capitol that was denied black people.

not involved in the expansion. In 1992, the strategic plan also reflected support for reserving space for Head Start. Go back and look at the master plan drawings for proof. In fact, our contractor told us we had to hold half our slots open for PCC students so they could enroll their children in our program.

The college wanted, and got, voters to support bond measures

for expansion; that it would have a positive impact on the community. And once the bond passed, and the plan went forward, that's when we're told 'you have to move'.

As of mid-June, we have to move. And let me make it clear that this doesn't reflect any negative criticism of Dr. Mildred Ollee (president, Cascade campus). We've had a great relationship with her. This has to do with board members and the folks that run the college.

It (displacement) reminds me of what happened some decades ago with Emanuel Hospital. They told residents that this was urban renewal, we have the right of imminent domain, and we will offer you a set price for your property.

Yugen: The history of this city shows how urban renewal disproportionately affects residents in these neighborhoods.

Herndon: Look at the freeway (Interstate 5) when it was built and how it disrupted the general community, and blacks that lived in the area. And in the 70s, a median was built up and down what was then known as Union Avenue (Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd), which took away valuable parking spaces and destroyed or harmed black businesses along the corridor. So, Union Avenue expansion, I-5, Memorial Coliseum, Emanuel Hospital, PCC—and some would argue the light rail project: Each section was an area where black people lived. Almost every decade since the 50s, you will find a major event around development or urban renewal that is for 'the greater good', but winds up being disruptive to communities of color.

Yugen: Over decades, I suspect you've identified obvious displacement patterns with this scenario, and especially when we look at gentrification in corridors of the inner north and northeast

sections of Portland?

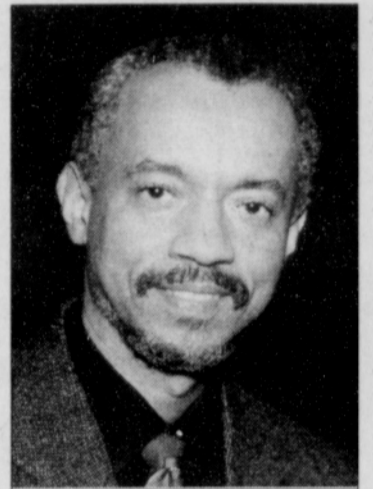
Herndon: Sure there are. The way it happens here is in the form of divestment. There were no investments made in housing, no effort made to improve services in this area. Redlining by banks made it difficult for blacks to get loans to buy or improve their property, and that's a matter of record. Complaints about police services. You allow a community to suffer economically and atrophy follows. And when these things happen, many folks call these disinvestments.

When property values fall, speculators come in who have access to capitol that was denied black people. They (speculators) come in and buy (real estate) for little or no money, fix it up to live in or sell and the price of the real estate (taxes) then skyrockets. And consequently, those folks who lived in the community for decades will find they are no longer able to afford the rent. Second-generation homeowners and the elderly struggle to pay the property taxes. So with speculations and gentrification, the value of properties has shot through the ceiling.

Yugen: That's amazing!

Herndon: Yugen, some folks saw this coming 25 years ago. This area of northeast Portland is some of the most valuable pieces of real estate in the city because its centrally located and within minutes from the Lloyd Center, Union Station, and Portland International Airport. You can walk to downtown, and freeways for travel are in proximity.

It was suggested that black folks buy up this property when it was depressed. Back then, you could get it for a song. But there were only a few people who did that. One of them was the late Willie Harris. That brother was very astute. I meet a lot of people who say they understand business. But I wonder if any of them every sat down with Willie Harris to learn from



Ron Herndon

people in our midst. He was very successful and didn't brag about it. It would have been great if our fraternal and religious institutions had made those purchases by pooling their collective buying power. We would own today what is now King Boulevard, Alberta Street, where all this development is occurring. It was possible.

At one time, I was associated with what was known as the Black Educational Center. With this non-profit, in about four years, from the mid to late 70s, we acquired three pieces of property on Northeast Alberta and 17th. Unfortunately many of us didn't have the foresight to buy up more property.

Yugen: Back then that sounds like the Golden Age of buying up property, and today, a missed opportunity. What will be the political fall out on this issue?

Herndon: Right now, it's almost impossible to get property today because the value has gone up. There are political ramifications, too, because blacks that can't afford rent are being forced to move to southeast Portland and Gresham. And what strength you had politically, is now diluted. The next time you see reapportionment, you will find that what was once District 18, which at its height was 50 percent black, in 10 years will drop to 30 to 25 percent black. Your ability to elect folks that represent your concerns and issues will be significantly lessened.

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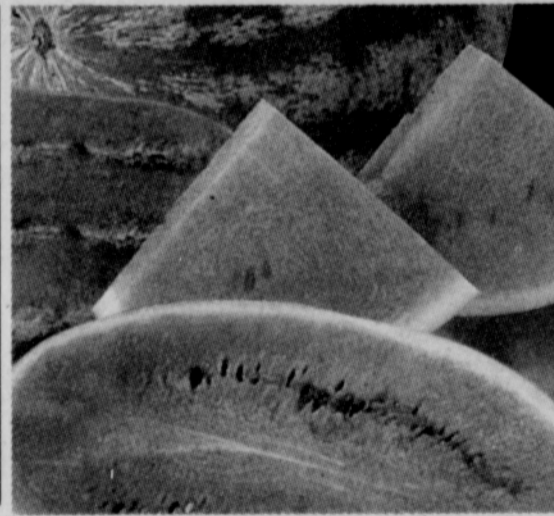
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