



# Church Hill North

## Richmond, VA

### Executive Summary

This site profile is part of a series that spotlights mixed-income community transformations that emphasize health and wellness in their strategic interventions. The Mixed-Income Strategic Alliance produced these profiles to better understand the health implications of creating thriving and inclusive communities with a socio-economically and racially diverse population. This site profile, which focuses on Creighton Court (and the new mixed-income community Church Hill North) was developed through interviews with local stakeholders and experts as well as a review of research, publicly-available information, and internal documents.

Creighton Court is a public housing development in the East End neighborhood of Richmond, Virginia. To address the issues surrounding this pocket of racially concentrated poverty in the East End, the Richmond Redevelopment & Housing Authority (RRHA) and the City of Richmond applied multiple times for funding through the federal Choice Neighborhoods Initiative to redevelop Creighton Court but have not been able to secure that funding. Despite not having these key federal resources, in 2016, Richmond stakeholders adopted key elements of the plan put forward in the Choice Neighborhoods application and began to execute a plan for a mixed-income community called Church Hill North, with a focus on addressing key social determinants of health.

This profile reveals the challenges of self-funding mixed-income transformation efforts, cobbling together resources from a combination of private sector, municipal, and philanthropic commitments and funding. However, united by a focus on residents, local leaders have organized and persisted across a number of efforts to

approaches to the complex problems of housing quality and stability, concentrated poverty, asset development, food deserts, etc. This profile also notes the challenges that arise when the prioritizing and balancing of physical development and human capital development are not fully in sync.

The takeaways from this process are, first, the caution to local leaders about the limitations of what can be accomplished without federal resources and leadership and the necessary precondition of consistent local leadership at the City and Housing Authority. Public capacity cannot be replaced with or relegated to civic leaders, despite best intentions. In addition, while there are ample efforts targeted to addressing the social determinants of health in the East End, the importance of balancing physical development with the other aspects of mixed-income communities is particularly evident. This story indicates the need to ensure physical development and human capital dimensions of mixed-income communities progress in tandem.

### Background & Context

Richmond, Virginia is a mid-size city still grappling with the effects of historical and structural racism that have helped to create and sustain deep inequities. The geographic patterns of poverty in the city and accompanying racial segregation in housing are deeply entrenched, as they are in many cities with histories similar to Rich-

neighborhood was once a vibrant, residential and mixed-use neighborhood, but the area suffered from decades of disinvestment, disrepair, and decline. Now, the neighborhood has one of the highest concentrations of poverty in Virginia, with a median household income of about \$15,500. More than 55% of residents live below the poverty line. In 2016, the Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) Center for Society & Health released an analysis that indicated a 20-year difference in life expectancy between residents of the East End and affluent areas of Richmond.<sup>1</sup>

The hopes and aspirations, as well as parallel suspicion and mistrust by some, about the Creighton Court redevelopment are informed by Richmond's previous efforts to create mixed-income communities. In 1999, the City of Richmond tore down the 440-unit Blackwell public housing development as part of the federal HOPE VI program.<sup>3</sup> The goal was to transform the site into a 583-unit mixed-income community. However, only 153 units were planned to be made available for public-housing residents, and only 161 of the total number of planned units were ever built. This was due to a 2002 setback with the developer, after which the housing authority struggled to complete the project. The resulting displacement of public housing residents, with little apparent pay-off or follow-through in terms of promised new housing, has led to continued distrust about the intentions and promises of the RRHA among the City's public housing residents.

Despite its checkered history on mixed-income communities, the RRHA has made clear its vision and preference that creating mixed-income communities is the most

to the residential units, this phase includes construction of a spacious community center with programming to offer children, youth, and families a “cradle to career pipeline” of support while also providing activities designed to strengthen relationships among community members and residents. The cost of this “first phase is estimated to be between \$23-25 million.

The second phase of redevelopment will add 60 units by the end of 2019, 50 of which will be mixed-income rental units and 10 of which will be home ownership units. Creighton Court residents will continue to relocate either offsite or to the Armstrong site. Moderate-income and market-rate renters will also be recruited to the mixed-income units. The second half of the Armstrong site will undergo construction to add more rental and home ownership units. The cost of this phase will be about \$25-29 million.

The third phase of redevelopment is likely to be further redefined, as RRHA and TCB are recalibrating what is possible, and by when, after not receiving Choice Neighborhoods funding. The third phase of redevelopment is thus currently unfunded.

## Funding

After the RRHA decided that the development efforts would proceed as planned even without Choice Neighborhoods funding, local organizations, city agencies, and larger institutions confirmed some of the financial commitments they had made to the development as part of the federal application. However, as they survey the likelihood of putting the required funding package together, many community leaders believe that the current citywide effort around improving schools is a higher funding priority than public housing transformation for the mayor and for the city council, and that the City is thus looking to the RRHA to rely on more conventional financing methods for housing redevelopment (such as tax credits and bonds). In fact, in December 2018, the City Council approved the issuance of \$4.9 million in general obligation bonds to help fund the construction of the Creighton Court “first phase of redevelopment.

Stakeholders cite the need to leverage additional local funds among corporate and philanthropic partners. In the past, much of the funding for Richmond’s public housing redevelopment has come from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, so the need for continuing interaction between the RRHA and the local philanthropic community has not seemed essential.

Stakeholders see this broadened partnership as vital in the current context, as the scale of the Creighton

Court/East End redevelopment is very large in scale and extends beyond the prior experience of both the City and the RRHA.

## Design & Implementation of Strategies

Preparing the Choice Neighborhoods application, while ultimately unsuccessful, gave purpose and an orientation to local stakeholders as they put together their goals and plans for the East End transformation. Local leaders and residents used the process to articulate the capacities, resources, and possibilities for the transformation of Creighton Court, and they took the occasion to establish a framework for addressing key social determinants of health. Further, in preparing the Choice application, the RRHA secured significant financial commitments from city government and from local foundations and corporations, as leaders came together from across sectors to build a plan for the redevelopment. The framework for the Choice application also both required and allowed local leaders to articulate a “People Plan,” using the framework that is central to the Choice Neighborhoods approach. Beyond the People Plan, other initiatives and efforts have sought to keep the residents’ needs and aspirations front and center.



of Community Wealth Building and the RRHA to estab-

The capacity of Richmond's private and philanthropic sector to collaborate seems to be a particularly important part of this story. Progress in Richmond has been made on the strength of existing relationships among community leaders, based on the familiarity with and trust in one another's work that comes with working in close partnership over the years. Not only do leaders of different organizations seem to appreciate each other on an interpersonal basis, but they often serve on boards and committees for each other's organizations. Leaders of the RMHF and RCHD are particularly worthy of note given their connectivity and credibility across the venues and sectors. The "coming together" of leadership in various guises through ROI seems to represent a way of leveraging these existing relationships and creating a space for leaders to discuss goals, think together (with residents) about what can be done to improve outcomes for public housing residents, and to agree on a framework, such as the social determinants of health, through which organizations might work together. Through its various structures, ROI has enabled resident voice and knowledge to influence other leaders and foster networks where residents can be supported through the transition to the new Church Hill North.

This collaboration is not always smooth or seamless. On occasion, it can look like a jumble of loosely connected activities across sectors and organizations, where the same leaders are common across those activities. However, in Richmond, according to many local leaders, these connections and working relationships are taking on a new coherence with the support of the People Plan, and the nonprofit sector is looking forward to collectively making more strategic decisions.

**Second, the Richmond experience demonstrates how public sector leadership is critical to any truly ambitious plan for mixed-income community development.**

On the plus side, RRHA demonstrated leadership in supporting redevelopment even in the absence of Choice Neighborhoods funding. Recognizing that plans would have to be adjusted and scaled down, the City, RRHA and other local partners put together a funding package that allowed Phase I of the Creighton Court redevelopment to move forward.

At the same time, local leaders suggest that Richmond also exemplifies the limitations of mixed-income transformation of public housing when the public housing authority and/or City Hall are not fully and consistently at the table or prioritizing the effort. Political leadership transitions, albeit normal, can create discontinuities, the emergence of new priorities (that displace previous ones), and capacity challenges. Even though housing development naturally invites people to think about how much role and responsibility the private sector can assume, mixed-income public housing transformation cannot be completely outsourced to the private, philanthropic and nonprofit sectors. Sustaining the roles of

RRHA and of city government over the long term cannot be underemphasized.

Some stakeholders suggested that, in the Richmond context, the most effective role of the public housing authority is to partner with organizations like ROI and other community groups to support residents in the transition, while serving as a liaison to HUD to manage requirements on the ground. RRHA's obligations to HUD and

**ability dynamics in a city and in its neighborhoods, presenting opportunities and challenges for mixed-income transformation.** Ten years ago, most stakeholders in Richmond were not paying attention to the need to preserve and create affordable housing. Since then, however, housing in both the city and region has become largely unaffordable for the most vulnerable residents. Now, with phases of the Creighton Court redevelopment starting and East End gentrification pressures manifesting even while a mixed-income vision prevails, the question is whether the East End can be preserved in a way that is recognizable to and inclusive of longtime residents. The possibility that future phases of redevelopment may have different occupancy, tenure, and diversity demographics than those envisioned concern many local leaders. No one wants a situation in which, because affordable housing units could not be financed due to unavailable subsidies, the neighborhood will change in ways that are no longer welcoming to those who have long called East End their home. This would only reinforce a narrative that benefits were never intended to accrue to the original Creighton Court residents.

The story of Richmond's East End is still very much in progress. Addressing wealth disparities and housing propelled Richmond forward in the Culture of Health Prize for the neighborhood changes that are starting to happen. Anchor institutions like VCU, Bon Secours and others are helping to build capacity; foundations are investing in key neighborhood strategies; and nonprofits and civic leaders are collaborating. However, the permanent, at-scale markers of physical transformation still lag. Important, yet small efforts like urban gardens and mobile markets galvanize residents around healthy eating while a large grocery store, albeit planned for, has been elusive to date.

How the balance of physical and human capital development in the East End continues to develop is in the hands of Richmond's public and private sector leaders and neighborhood residents, and can be expected to change in many ways in the years ahead.

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