

Mixed-Income Housing Is Transforming Downtowns – And Communities

For some time, politicians, housing advocates, community activists, and urban planners in this community have been discussing and exploring ways to add more affordable housing units to the downtown area. We know from the DIB's own research that a significant number of people that do not live in or near downtown today would choose to do so if safe, affordable, and quality units were available. Many other communities, having faced like dilemmas and participated in similar conversations, have chosen to actively encourage and support mixed-income residential developments to realize such community priorities.

Mixed-income residential developments by definition include affordable, workforce, and market-rate households living side by side in the same neighborhood development. All income levels are represented and integrated in such developments. The consequences and results from such efforts in other cities have reinforced the benefits of such developments nationwide.

Mixed-income developments reduce the incidents of social ills, expand opportunities for residents, and enhance the understanding of differing people and viewpoints. Living in a genuinely mixed-income neighborhood makes it much more likely that those in the workforce, or of workforce age, will be employed and will advance in their earning potential because of the influences afforded by exposure and interaction within such a community. Such developments reduce the negative attributes and consequences of lower income persons being concentrated within a designated location. The need for more affordable and attainable residential options in areas where people want to live is met. Such neighborhoods tend to have better neighborhood schools or nearby schools because more of the residents get involved. Better school performance and attendance by school-age residents is a by-product. The incidents of crime are far fewer in mixed-income neighborhood than in isolated low-income housing developments.

The quality of design and construction is usually of a higher caliber in mixed-income residential developments than in traditional affordable housing projects. Such realities serve to attract other new developments nearby and to give confidence to existing owners/residents to invest the funds necessary to improve their own properties/homes. The influence of appropriately scaled and designed attractive housing helps to stabilize the neighborhood where it is occurring and signal other investors that opportunity exist there. Mixed-income housing is not typically high-rise except in really large cities. Instead, it reflects the existing design, scale, and pattern of the immediate neighborhood so that it fits easily. Cookie cutter designs, monolithic floor plans, and defined development borders comprised of ditches, fences, gates, or open fields are not components of a mixed-income residential development. The finished product of a mixed-income development does not look significantly different from surrounding homes that existed prior to the advent of the development. It is very difficult for visitors to a mixed-income development to distinguish between the homes occupied by households that qualify as low or moderate income residents and those occupied by those that could afford to live anywhere. Such developments cannot cut corners just to warehouse people. Quality of place and maintaining that ambiance, is important in such developments are to succeed. Mixed-income

developments must also attract populations that possess more housing options but choose to locate in that neighborhood. Such market-rate residents will demand that the buildings be constructed and maintained to a higher standard – or those with the most choices will choose not to live there. Thoughtful and experienced management is absolutely necessary to achieve and maintain the high-quality standards needed by such residential developments.

When viewed over a time horizon of more than one generation, mixed-income residential development actually reduces the subsidies needed to provide affordable housing because the housing units are of better quality, are better maintained, and as a result, last longer. Mixed-income developments tend to attract residents of mixed cultures bringing with them a rich diversity of experiences and preferences to share. By attracting such a downtown residential population, the commercial offering of goods and services becomes less homogenous and more varied in terms of style and price-point. Because such developments are more complex and difficult to plan, finance, and implement, mixed-income developments usually take longer to get going and to get fully completed. However, the benefits appear to be long-lasting and of significant value to the community and the individuals residing within them. Downtown Pensacola and the close-in older neighborhoods around downtown could benefit from such a development.