



Ashley Lommers-Johnson, CEO

Raleigh Housing Authority CEO Address to Heritage Park residents on June 15, 2023 meeting

Good evening. My name is Ashley Lommers-Johnson. I have been in Raleigh as the Chief Executive Officer of the Raleigh Housing Authority for two months. Since I am new, I confess that I know very little about you. I know very little about the City of Raleigh. So I am here, in part, to listen and learn from you, to learn about your concerns about the present and the future, about your fears, and about your hopes and dreams.

Welcome to this initial event to kick off a planning process that will rely on you, the residents of Heritage Park, and other stakeholders in Raleigh to help guide the planning for the future of Heritage Park. Thanks for being here.

What brings us here?

During more than 30 years of work in housing authorities across the country, I have come to the sad conclusion that those who hold sway in the federal government have very little willingness to ensure that public housing communities are successful. For decades now, Congress has not appropriated or provided enough funding to ensure that our communities and the developments that house them survive, let alone thrive.

What are our options? What can we do?

The available options to address the needs of Heritage Park and other public housing properties in Raleigh are very limited.

If we continue under the current underfunded public housing program, eventually Heritage Park and other developments will crumble before our eyes. This is not a responsible option.

If we could pursue the option known as RAD, we would be able extend the life of the development and make significant improvements, but it will not fundamentally change the present or the future. Also, it will not add a single additional housing unit to serve those who need it. But more importantly, because of the dire physical needs of Heritage Park, this option is not available to us.

There is a third option. A difficult one, but an exciting one. We can demolish and transform Heritage Park into a new, healthy community. Under this option, we will become less dependent on federal subsidies. This option gives us an opportunity to write the future story of Heritage Park. And it begins tonight, here under this tent.

What is it that we and you want for Heritage Park?

Before I moved to Raleigh, I visited so I can look for a place to live. Here is what I was looking for:

- A place close to where I work
- A place close to downtown
- A place where I or my wife can walk and feel safe
- A place where I can walk to a park
- A place where I can walk and meet friends for coffee or lunch
- A neighborhood that is culturally and racially diverse

What I would like for residents of Heritage Park and the future residents of all our communities is what I wanted. And more! A place where you feel safe. Where you don't have to drive more than 15 minutes to get to work. Where your children have a safe place to play. Where you have access to affordable childcare. And other amenities.

Who are we planning for?

I am here tonight, and we are here, to hear your concerns and your fears about the present and the future. We are here to hear also about your hopes and dreams. What you need and want.

In addition to creating a plan that addresses your needs, there are countless others who can barely hold on. They can't pay their rent and for the food they need. Some of them are your friends, your co-workers, and members of your family. Whether they work at a grocery store. Or as a teacher. Or as a social worker. They too need affordable housing. As we plan for Heritage Park's future, we must also consider their need for affordable housing.

In addition to those who need housing now, there will be generations that will live here after you. Heritage Park is almost 50 years old. We will be judged for what we do by those who come after us, not only 50 years from now but 75 years from now, 100 years from now. We and you are about to engage in a process that will also address their needs. This is a solemn and serious task.

Why the urgency?

As if this task is not big enough or serious enough already, let me add a deep concern that I have. You cannot drive or walk the streets of Southeast Raleigh and not notice the speed and devastation of gentrification and displacement. Before our eyes, we are witnessing the disappearance of affordable housing in Southeast Raleigh as a result of gentrification. The people who are being displaced as we speak are mostly black and brown. From a neighborhood that was traditionally black and brown. I am committed not only to the preservation and increase of affordable housing. I am also deeply committed to ensuring that we create more housing here and all over the City of Raleigh so that black and brown people are not disproportionately forced to the outskirts of the city and beyond in search of housing that is affordable.

We are beginning the planning process that will ultimately impact your lives and the lives of generations to come. We will be jointly accountable for what we create.

I welcome you to this process. I pledge to you our respect, our commitment to service, and our willingness to listen and learn.

Ashley Lommers-Johnson