

As we emerge from a tragic pandemic, let's catalyze action among professionals in the fields that shape the physical housing and communities where we live. This series of case studies shares innovations that are advancing a set of **guiding principles** for built environment professionals—from creative ways to redress inequities and engage the public in participatory planning, to unique housing and community models that enable every resident to thrive.



## Resident-led Design at Friendship Court

### Piedmont Housing Alliance, Charlottesville, VA

By Stephanie Firestone and Esther Greenhouse

**Piedmont Housing Alliance** aims to build mixed-income housing, prioritizing zero displacement of existing residents. By building in phases, Piedmont can move residents into their new homes before demolishing the old ones and rebuilding them for the next group of residents. Their success centers around empowering residents to articulate their aspirations, and for this information to guide the planning process for housing and multigenerational neighborhood solutions that serve families, older residents, and persons with disabilities. Piedmont also provides rental properties, community management, and housing counseling services. Through relationship building, establishing trust, and creative local partnerships, the organization also advances racial and economic equity by helping people improve their financial health and move towards homeownership.

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## Needs/Challenges

A history of discriminatory urban planning and segregation has contributed to housing affordability challenges at the heart of downtown Charlottesville, Virginia. Amidst the urban renewal that took place 60-70 years ago, a previously thriving majority-Black neighborhood was destroyed and sat vacant for many years. In the 1970s, the neighborhood was rebuilt as a 12-acre master block of **deeply subsidized (Section 8) housing**. The neighborhood has only one point of entry and all front doors face into a courtyard with their back doors to the streets, a design that for the last 40 years has kept residents physically and financially isolated from the larger, economically diverse and thriving downtown community.

## Innovations

Piedmont Housing Alliance is a nonprofit organization that owns and manages the current 150 apartments at Friendship Court, its largest property. The site serves a broad range of intergenerational households, from young families with children to those headed by older adults. Piedmont has worked with a resident-elected Advisory Committee to redesign their future neighborhood, which will triple in density to serve 450 households, provide a diverse array of affordable housing and neighborhood infrastructure to support the immediate community, and facilitate relationships with the larger community. “If all we do is build better housing, we will just help Friendship Court families be poor better,” explains Executive Director and longtime affordable housing practitioner Sunshine Mathon. “We need other community investments and interventions that provide pathways to economic stability and mobility.” In total, these investments in housing and community infrastructure will total approximately \$250 million once the four phases of construction are complete.

### Resident-Led Design

Community engagement is often cited by developers as a project goal, yet true resident involvement rarely actually happens. That is because it introduces additional players, processes, and complexities, with the end result of straining and stretching a project’s timeline. Without it, however, development organizations tend to inadvertently rely on stereotypes and assumptions about what is good for residents and what they want. By contrast, at the core of Piedmont’s ethos is establishing trust and building relationships with residents. For the project to be guided by resident aspirations, they addressed issues that might impede residents’ involvement and offered a variety of engagement opportunities including focus groups, surveys and community meetings. Through this process, community members elected representatives to a resident-led Advisory Committee that makes decisions on any issue of substance. The Committee meets 1-2 times per month, and participating residents are paid for their expertise and time, just like any other consultant.



This process led to a set of guiding principles that drive all the design and development work:

- **Zero Displacement** - No family will be displaced by the redevelopment. The plan to make that happen was enabled by the availability of three acres of existing open space on the property. On that land, Piedmont will build the first phase of housing—beginning in late 2021—and, upon completion, will move residents from existing dwellings, which will then be demolished and rebuilt for the following phases.
- **Tiers of Affordability** - The plan provides levels of affordability, so families that begin to earn sufficient income can rent or purchase housing they can afford, moving out of one tier of housing while remaining in the community, which may free up Section 8 homes for other families. Three housing options—multifamily apartment buildings, townhomes, and single family homes—will increase the diversity of residents, thus also helping to destigmatize living in subsidized housing.
- **Balanced Priorities** - A holistic plan reflects the priorities residents articulated for every aspect of the community, including such elements as green spaces, neighborhood connectivity, and embedded community resources, among others. A multigenerational focus will not only result in accessibility for those with mobility limitations as well as people pushing strollers, but also opportunities for older people to feel they are contributing to the community, such as working in the Early Learning Center.
- **Transformational Investment** - This investment in the community and in the lives of current and future residents, is an effort by Piedmont to redress race-based inequities such as cycles of generational poverty.



## Community Infrastructure and Programming

The redevelopment plan for Friendship Court aims to incorporate a host of valuable community assets, including a Financial Opportunity Center, a Health Center, an Early Learning Center, and a neighborhood grocery store. The focal point for community activities and services will be a redesigned community center. The building will include a kitchen and serving area, a food pantry and distribution center for fresh produce and hot meals and snacks for children, and three large classroom-style spaces including a computer lab—responding to articulated needs ranging from children doing homework to older adults wanting to use telehealth services. The center will also be equipped with solar battery energy storage, so it can serve as a community hub when power goes out during weather emergencies. On-site staff will provide residents with guidance and support as they address a variety of challenges. An on-site Economic Opportunity Coordinator will both support residents with employment opportunities as well as manage a new HUD-approved Family Self-Sufficiency program that encourages residents who obtain income increases to save for the future, by matching the deposits of enrolled residents. The center will host its own programming such as girls' mentorships, healthy-eating educational events, and older-adult activities, as well as host a variety of programs through dozens of partner organizations and community groups.



## Finance

Financing the development of affordable housing in the US is complex, often requiring 6-10 layers of funding. Friendship Court has 15-20 different streams of funding, including Low Income Housing Tax Credits (a federal public-private financing tool for affordable housing), local funding from the City of Charlottesville, low-interest financing from the Federal and State Housing Trust Funds, and private foundations with an interest in the synergy between affordable housing, solar power, and energy efficiency. Additionally, a novel use of **Tax Increment Financing (TIF)**,<sup>1</sup> wherein the City approved the return of 100 percent of the TIF back to the project over the next 30 years, allows Piedmont to leverage additional financing to achieve its goals for Friendship Court. Another unique source of funding comes through the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, which the state of Virginia recently joined, dedicating nearly 50 percent of the proceeds to support energy efficiency in affordable housing.



<sup>1</sup> A vehicle for local governments to re-direct anticipated future increases in property taxes of a developing site back to the site itself, to help fund public infrastructure or other improvements.

## Successes to Date

Piedmont's leaders believe their success is attributed to the organization and its staff prioritizing residents' quality of life. Deputy Director Charlene Green says that "it is professional negligence if we don't show we care"; moreover, she believes residents are conscious of this prioritization, which then carries through to their caring for their neighbors and their neighborhood.



In fact, one former resident continues to care even though she no longer lives in the neighborhood. Ms. Myrtle Houchens and her children lived for 27 years in what was then known as Garrett Square. Ms. Houchens' reason for leaving the community, in fact, illustrates one of the community issues that the redevelopment is addressing: the ability to remain in the neighborhood, regardless of change in financial status.

Through Piedmont's financial counseling services, Ms. Houchens, a single mother who worked as a teacher in the elementary school, was able to start building equity via home ownership. Yet the only option in the development was subsidized housing, so she had to move out of her community. She nonetheless stayed connected to the neighborhood and served as a resident-elected member of its Advisory Board, and she currently works for Piedmont as the Community Liaison. Ms. Houchens says, "This community instilled in me what community is about and provided so much for me and my family; that's what I want to continue to nurture in Friendship Court." This nurturing includes ensuring that older residents "are not pushed aside or separate from, but part of," she added.

Ms. Houchens says, "Getting residents to trust that [the redevelopment is] for the betterment of everyone involved has not been an easy process." The fencing surrounding the neighborhood made some people feel imprisoned, and Ms. Houchens would tell them, "Imprisonment is only what you make it, if that's the mindset you have." Reflecting on the community she cares so much about, Ms. Houchens, says: "It's important for residents to feel they are equal with everyone else that they live around." Everyone had a voice at the table throughout the process, and Ms. Houchens is gratified in seeing residents who were initially very hesitant to speak now participating in decision making and feeling comfortable sitting at the table. "I was able to bring them forth, allowing me to step back," she says.

Deputy Director Charlene Green explains that Piedmont is also succeeding in making real changes in equity because they are willing to ask themselves difficult questions like "What does it mean to be an anti-racist organization?" and to have similar, difficult conversations with their partners. For example, Piedmont organizes trainings that examine national data related to the social determinants of health, and then focuses on local data and "how to be better partners in the fight against oppression," Green added. The local focus also includes facilitated dialogues around equity issues in Charlottesville, questioning how these affect the organization's interactions with residents.

## Still to Come

Piedmont is either leading or partnering on several other projects, many based on the Friendship Court model of resident/client-led redevelopment without displacement. It is working with the University of Virginia's (UVA) Equity Center to develop a social impact protocol, which will provide developers with a framework for building in community engagement and resident-led design.

Additionally, in partnership with the UVA Equity Center and **Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC)**, Piedmont has applied for the Kellogg Foundation's Racial Equity 2030 grant, which seeks game-changing, achievable projects with significant equity impact. If funded, the partners will use the Friendship Court redevelopment project as a pilot and prototype to replicate nationwide with LISC.

In another creative collaboration, Piedmont is doing site planning with two local churches that want to use their land for affordable housing—one in support of older adults and the other for persons with disabilities. Since small projects are difficult to finance, Piedmont helped the two churches develop a shared vision and apply as single project at scattered sites.

## Replicability

Deputy Director Green suggests that, as Piedmont's experience illustrates, organizations should start by uncovering existing opportunities and first look to resources already available in their local communities. For example, in addition to the above-mentioned partnerships with the university, Piedmont utilizes UVA's intern program for time-sensitive tasks like record-keeping and answering phones, which frees up staff to work directly with residents.

But the richest and most significant resources for this work, of course, are the members of the community such as Ms. Houchens—who have years of experience in the community, and, more importantly, the community's trust. Green contends that "What makes doing the work of relationship building difficult is the time it takes to meet people where they're at;" groups that advocate for equity in community planning and development increasingly stress the need to move at the speed of trust. Everything hinges on that key element, Green emphasizes. "But," she adds, "that's where the really hard work of trust-building begins."

**For more information:**  
[www.piedmonthousingalliance.org](http://www.piedmonthousingalliance.org).

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