

Atlanta can and must correct longstanding housing deficiencies
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Bruce is president of Civitas Housing Group, a developer of mixed-income housing. Spanning a career in housing development that began with a Habitat for Humanity house in 1985, Bruce has led the development of a wide range of housing, from affordable rental apartments to high-end condos and townhouses to supportive housing for persons experiencing homelessness. He also serves as interim director of the Church of the Common Ground, an Episcopal parish “without walls” that ministers on the streets of downtown Atlanta to persons without homes.

The selfies at the march have been taken; impassioned pleas for reforms have been registered; thousands of white and black people showed up day after day to peacefully protest; and Major Bottoms showed what leadership is all about; but the calls for “No Justice, No peace” continue to ring. If we should “not waste a crisis”, then truly, what are we to do beyond the slogans and sermons?

A common refrain heard in many conversations is that we are standing at a portal to the future and that we will not go back to how we were. In fact, in a recent Atlanta Business Chronicle feature article, dozens of Atlanta’s business and civic leaders spoke eloquently about doing just that. Housing is an area that is rife for reform and can have enormous and lasting positive impact. In (virtual) front of 250 people at the Atlanta Regional Housing Forum recently, Bill Bolling stated that “housing has everything to do with health and education; it has everything to do with racial equity and upward mobility”. How so?

In the wake of the 2008 Great Recession, the black homeownership rate in Atlanta dropped from 55% in 2007 to 44% today and with it most of the household net worth for those families. (The white homeownership rate in Atlanta today is over 84%.) After the crash, Wall Street related firms swooped into metro Atlanta and bought tens of thousands of houses out of foreclosure, many of which were owned by black Atlantans. This transfer of wealth has been described as one of the largest in history and is a primary contributor to our city having one of the highest rates of income inequality in the nation, painful if complicated evidence of what is meant by “systemic injustice”.

Prior to the onslaught of COVID-19, many low-income households in the City were already under severe financial pressure as rising rents and property taxes forced many to leave the city. Most of those households were black, and this transition is literally changing the face of Atlanta. In fact, the gentrification has been so widespread that the national consulting firm HR&A reported in a study commissioned in 2018 by the City (but never released) the shocking conclusion that in ten years the demand for low income housing units would *decrease*, because so many of those vulnerable households would have been forced out by then. If so, then so long “beloved community”.

If we learn nothing else from the terrible scourges still afflicting us—systemic injustice and COVID-19-- we should recognize how inextricably interconnected and interdependent we are. A platform for health, education, and upward mobility, stable housing facilitates resiliency of people and their communities. Moreover, affordable housing enables Atlanta to maintain an important economic

competitive edge given its enviable job growth, and any city benefits from having its essential workers live near their place of employment. One does not need an economist or developer to know this.

In response, Mayor Bottoms, a broad coalition of business and civic organizations operating as House ATL, and the venerable Housing Forum itself have surfaced several priority measures that can have a dramatic impact on housing. Several months ago, Mayor Bottoms proposed a \$100 million Housing Opportunity Bond, which has been shelved due to understandable concerns about the city's financial health. Urban planners and residential developers know that zoning additional density can unlock thousands of affordable housing units by the private sector without any public subsidy. Tenant and homeowner's rights, in Georgia among the weakest in the country, must be strengthened legislatively to help alleviate the financial devastation to low-income households caused by eviction and foreclosures. And finally, emblematic of blatant racial and class bias, landlords must not discriminate against potential tenants whose rental payment source is a public subsidy.

These solutions represent tangible measures that will make a major difference. Specifically, to fund the annual debt service on the housing bond, the City Council and the Mayor must courageously and shrewdly identify a new source of revenue for the City, however difficult that might be. To institute needed zoning changes, local neighborhood leaders, many of whom are white, must provide political cover for our elected officials to level the playing field, even though they may feel that their property values will be impacted.

The question is, what will emerge from this emergency? Will we return to the old patterns of wealth accumulation and homeownership? Will Wall Street buy more houses out of foreclosure or will we establish a fund for preservation and acquisition? Will we decide that affordable housing is essential infrastructure? If we are to have a reset, then we must have tools and resources to do so.

Investments in housing need to be made across the board—owner-occupied rehabs to help households stay in their homes; new construction of affordable single-family houses and rental apartments to meet high demand for essential workers; and supportive housing for very-low income individuals. Over time, these are investments that will change the trajectory, enabling more households to flourish.

Although clearly still present, in the midst of this tumult we discern that polarization has for the moment taken a back seat to a wave of humanizing activity on the part of ordinary Americans, who recognize and will support changes to heal the damaging rifts that have opened in our society. Moreover, Atlanta has some of the finest mixed-income development firms in the country; indeed, Atlanta perfected the mixed-income model that has proven to be so successful. We know how to do this.

COVID-19 and unexpurgated racism exposed crucial, even deadly, vulnerabilities in their respective systems. We cannot ignore these costly flaws. If we do not fix them, two decades of gains among low income and black household employment and wealth may be erased, not to mention a country torn apart. If we do not act with alacrity, our city will be set back for decades. To not learn from the lessons of the Great Recession, COVID-19, and the righteous protests against racism and a rigged system is foolish; to not act boldly is to irreparably diminish the dream.

