

Counterpoint: Public housing in Minneapolis is being preserved, not 'privatized'

Coverage of Minneapolis Public Housing Authority efforts is welcomed but should not include this trigger language, which by reasonable standards does not apply.

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The Minneapolis Public Housing Authority (MPHA) is embarking on a historic effort to preserve and renovate our 6,000 units of public housing. These apartments, townhouses and houses across the city provide homes to more than 10,000 of the city's lowest-income families, seniors and the disabled, including many people of color and refugees. The federal government, unfortunately, now funds only 10 percent of the repair costs these buildings need. This situation is unsustainable.

The Star Tribune has lately taken a welcome interest in covering this essential community infrastructure, diving into the important details of how and why the overhaul is necessary. This deep ongoing coverage is important to focus attention on the fate of these community assets and on members of our community who are too often off the radar.

In some recent stories, however, the newspaper has taken an unfortunate approach in framing this conversation for readers. The [latest](#), on Sept. 5, appeared in the paper under the headline "Mpls. seeks to privatize some public housing." The MPHA contests this description of our work in the strongest possible terms. To characterize any of our plans as "privatization" does a disservice to readers who deserve a clear picture of efforts to preserve our housing. "Privatize" is a highly charged trigger word that is frequently weaponized in debates about affordable housing. The MPHA's view on the term is established and widely available, yet our objections were neither sought nor presented in the piece.

It is a valid question whether anything the MPHA is exploring would be considered "privatization" by any reasonable standard. When you hear that word, what comes to mind? Are we selling our buildings? No. Will we give control of our buildings — operational policies, resident rights, setting rent levels — to anyone? No. Can public housing residents, under any scenario, lose their federal housing benefits in this process? Once again, categorically, no: Residents' housing and rights are protected by a raft of public documents, including federal law, residents' lease with us and the terms of the programs we might use.

The misplaced reference to privatization stems most recently from our application for the Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) program of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). As it says on HUD's RAD website, RAD is a program designed for one purpose: "a powerful tool to preserve and improve public housing properties." Housing authorities elsewhere in the U.S. have used it to preserve almost 100,000 homes. We recently applied to preserve and make major renovations to one of our oldest high-rise properties, the Elliot Twins.

RAD itself simply converts the underlying federal subsidy from one pool to another; properties are federally funded before and after. If we need to make major repairs, residents are guaranteed

a comparable place to live in the meantime and an ironclad right to return when we finish the work.

In some cases, converting a building's funding using HUD's RAD program may allow us to work with investors who receive Low-Income Housing Tax Credits. To claim the tax credit, this investor shares ownership with us for a 15-year period. The investor cannot, however, raise the rent, evict people, set building policies or alter the long-term use of the building to house very low-income people. Make no mistake: The MPHA hopes to seek outside investment to contribute to necessary, major building renovations. But it is hard to label this "privatizing" when the buildings would remain publicly subsidized, publicly controlled, publicly managed, publicly owned and true to their public mission.

We would also point out that nonprofit (and actually private) affordable housing providers across the state use Low-Income Housing Tax Credits to build and renovate affordable housing. The MPHA — which brings an even higher level of public accountability, a long-term guarantee of affordability and subsidies that can reach the lowest-income households — is subjected to a rather baffling standard by those who stoke fears about privatization.

Rather than lean on misleading terminology, we would expect the Star Tribune and any public officials diving into these issues to step back and consider the point of it all. The outcome we seek is no less than the preservation of every public housing unit for the next 50 years and beyond, safeguarding the rights of our residents to a safe, quality home. It will take all of us — the MPHA, the city, the state, and federal, nonprofit and private partners — to get there. Framing the issue in inflammatory terms does no service to the community and takes our eye off what really matters: the people we serve.

Greg Russ is executive director of the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority.