



## BEDROSIAN CENTER



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# COMPLICATIONS AND CONTRADICTIONS IN A CHANGING NEIGHBORHOOD



*by Lisa Bates*

Across the street from Humboldt Gardens is a small apartment complex for families with a parent in recovery from substance or alcohol addiction, and the office where residents meet with their Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) caseworkers. There's a Salvation Army and a Head Start nearby, too. But within two blocks, houses are selling for upwards of \$600,000 (the median for Portland is \$345k), and market-rate apartments run well over \$2,000 a month for a two bedroom unit.

The corridor of gleaming high rises along Vancouver and Williams Avenues is a marked change from the early 2000s. When the Housing Authority of Portland (now

known as Home Forward) applied for HOPE VI funds for the old Iris Court development, it was known as a rough area. Residents who lived there, or who knew of it by reputation, don't wish for a return to the open-air drug dealing or occasional gunshots. At the same time, Home Forward's leadership saw the neighborhood as having the right location for connecting residents to opportunities to move out of poverty, and it envisioned a transformative redevelopment that would feature safe, affordable, stable, and high quality housing. Humboldt is on two frequent service bus lines that traverse the city, with additional transit lines heading to major employment centers. Along with social service agencies, the Cascade Campus of Portland Community College (PCC) is within walking distance (and was also about to renovate and expand). There is a public library branch and a high school, and at the time, an elementary school adjacent to the development. While the neighborhood was low income, redeveloping this site was viewed as another model of the 'moving to opportunity' concept with residents maintaining access to these institutional supports.

Home Forward's visions may have been perfectly realized had their planned changes been the only changes that occurred in the neighborhood around Humboldt Gardens. But they weren't. The neighborhood was "discovered" by the broad economic forces driving change in the region, such that private investment poured into the neighborhood and amenities targeting a new, more affluent group of Portlanders. Gentrification created other changes that the Humboldt Gardens community has had to adjust to.

As a consequence, the neighborhood today is a mixed bag for families' sense of connection and opportunity. On the positive side, as Home Forward hoped, the neighborhood is not nearly as rough as it was before. For example, Home Forward staff who saw the transformation are delighted that children play at the pocket park without parents hovering close—something they say would not have been possible in the old days. Nearly everyone feels safer, with some women even saying they are surprised they've ended up living on a block they knew as teens as a place to avoid. The redevelopment has created better access to local amenities. When residents are able to attend PCC and have their children in child care on campus, they are able to advance their education — and especially for those without cars, they report that the location is essential to their success.

However, the changes are not all working to the advantage of Humboldt Gardens residents. The neighborhood saw a long decline in child population and, coupled with an influx of in-movers whose children attend private or charter schools, the neighborhood saw a sufficient decline in school aged children that the walkable

Humboldt Elementary school closed. Parents whose children had to transfer (and now ride a bus) to another school express their disappointment in how much more difficult it is to deal with transportation and to participate in school activities.



Since the HOPE VI redevelopment, the broader neighborhood has been physically and economically transformed by the purchasing power of new residents. Housing costs have risen as a result, increasing pressure on many original neighborhood residents, many of whom were low-income and people of color, and pushing an increasing number of them out of the neighborhood. Along similar lines, the new grocery store is a local chain known for organic and sustainable – and pricey – food choices. Many Humboldt Gardens residents now struggle to get to affordable food unless they own cars. Further, businesses owned by people of color have become

rarer, as older buildings have been torn down and replaced with retail spaces filled with boutiques and restaurants with upscale cocktail lists.

It is as if two communities live in the same space but share little (nothing?). Most residents of Humboldt Gardens and a few other nearby subsidized, regulated housing developments say they simply don't go to the new retail outlets (offerings?), even though they are just two blocks away. Moreover, while the physical design of Humboldt Gardens is now integrated with the street grid, the new neighbors don't really mix with the lower-income oldtimers. In a particularly poignant interview, one woman speaking about this lack of interaction explained: "evidently, this is still the ghetto—and these are still the projects."

In 2014, the City of Portland announced a bold plan to increase new affordable housing construction in Northeast Portland, with a priority placement for families who have been displaced from these neighborhoods to return. They will come back to dramatically changed demographics and a neighborhood center that caters to high income consumers. Learning how Humboldt Gardens residents get along in this context could help to align services and suggest needs that these new developments could try to fulfill.

The lower-income and minority families living in and near Humboldt Gardens are experiencing the contradictions and complications of neighborhood opportunity in a fast-growing West Coast city. The concept of opportunity locations is not as straightforward as moving to the suburbs from a low-income, under-resourced central city. We hope the research on how Humboldt Gardens residents experience the neighborhood, and what additional supports they may need, will inform new programs beyond the housing authority's that can help reduce the negative aspects of the changes that have taken place.

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