

HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION

On February 28, 2013, the Human Relations Commission (HRC) unanimously voted to make the following recommendations to the City Council regarding Buena Vista Mobile Home Park.

Commentary:

The sale of the property on which the BVMHP is located will displace approximately 375 people, a significant majority of whom are low-income and Hispanic. Displacing a whole neighborhood is an event few Palo Altans have experienced. It is something done to people, not with them or for them. Among these residents are approximately 125 children, 103 of whom attend Palo Alto schools. For the children, the opportunity of attending Palo Alto schools ranks as high in their parents' priorities as it does for most other families in our community.

For the residents, the BVMHP is a micro-community that provides safety and personal and social connections that are deeply rooted. Because the possibility of reproducing the social benefits of the Buena Vista community elsewhere in Palo Alto is negligible, it is imperative that those with influence in this complex situation act with the interests of the Buena Vista residents prominently in mind.

In addition to the effects on individuals, the displacement of the BVMHP has implications for the larger community as well. This 80+ year-old enclave represents a significant proportion of Palo Alto's low-income residents and its ethnic diversity. For Palo Alto authentically to value such diversity, it needs to facilitate, support, and sustain the kinds of residential opportunities that make it possible.

Though the displacement of the BVMHP is a single event, it is a harbinger of future possibilities when residential or commercial developments impact low-income residents. Rather than treat this situation as a one-time matter—though it emphatically is such for those affected—a longer view anticipating similar future events needs to have a place in the present dialogue.

Accordingly, the HRC offers to the City Council the following recommendations regarding both present and future.

Regarding the pending dislocation of the BVMHP:

The HRC recommends that the City Council, in its own actions and those over which it has influence, apply these guidelines:

1. Make every effort to enable displaced Buena Vista residents to relocate in Palo Alto.
2. Urge the PAUSD to allow Buena Vista children and youth now attending Palo Alto schools to continue to do so as long as possible, up to and including high school graduation.
3. Assure that monetary relocation assistance is adequate to enable those displaced to acquire housing that is affordable and provides equivalent or better community amenities, especially education.
4. Assure that no displaced resident becomes homeless as a consequence of the closing of BVMHP.

Regarding future residential development that displaces low-income residents:

The HRC recommends that the City Council link a social impact report to the approval of developments that would displace low-income residents. Such a report would . . .

1. Identify the impacts of the project on such residents,
2. Identify mitigations of those impacts, and,
3. To the extent morally warranted and legally possible, build the responsibility for those mitigations into the development process, either at the cost of the developer, the City, other levels of government, engaged nonprofits, or some combination of these.

Designing such a social impact report and incorporating it into City processes should be integral to the Housing Element of the Comprehensive Plan.