Smithsonian Tour of DC Cooperatives

On Saturday morning, May 20, at 9:30 in the morning, a busload of 40 people began their tour of eight significant DC cooperatives. Before the day ended at 5:00, tour members had walked through 18 apartments and townhouses, ate lunch at the last remaining public restaurant operating in a housing cooperative, and enjoyed an afternoon tea on the rooftop of another historic cooperative, enjoying sweeping vistas of the city.

The tour was arranged and organized by the DC Cooperative Housing Coalition (CHC) for the Smithsonian Associates to recognize 85 years of cooperative housing in the District of Columbia. The planning, initiated in September 2005, included a mix of cooperatives that showed the diversity of complexes ranging from old and new, small and large, to single buildings and multi-building complexes. It was a rare opportunity for people to learn about, and walk through, significant housing cooperatives and enter rarely seen apartments and townhouses. Barry Moss, who lives at the Westchester Cooperative and was a real estate appraiser specializing in housing cooperatives, was the tour guide.

The tour began at the Southwest waterfront at Harbour Square (500 N Street, SW), a 40 year old complex built in 1966 as a cooperative and whose design combines 60’s-era high-rise apartments and townhouses with 1790s historic townhouses. The first unit visited was a penthouse apartment with a roof terrace that overlooked the Southwest waterfront and has a view that runs from the Woodrow Wilson Bridge to the National Airport and Jefferson Memorial to the Kennedy Center. From there, tour members visited two of Harbour Square’s “Wheat Row” townhouses, listed on the Registry of the National Historic Trust, that are among the city’s oldest townhouses, dating back to 1793.

Next on the tour, members walked across the street to walk through three townhouses and an apartment at River Park Mutual Homes (1301 Delaware Avenue, SW). Built as a cooperative in 1963 under the sponsorship of the Reynolds Metal Company, the high-rise apartments and barrel-roofed townhouses have distinctive aluminum construction. Ms. Ricki Cramer and other members of the cooperative served as hosts to describe its construction and history. Our River Park hosts were very gracious and accommodating and offered water and orange juice to tour members as they left the complex to board the bus.

From Southwest, the tour traveled to the Watergate South (700 New Hampshire, NW) and Watergate East (2500 Virginia Avenue, NW) cooperatives where Ms. Gigi Winston greeted tour members. Watergate East and Watergate South were opened in
1965 and 1971, respectively, and they, along with Watergate West (opened in 1968) were all built as cooperatives from their initial design. The tour started with a visit to a large penthouse, formed from multiple units, with an oversized roof terrace with spectacular views of the Potomac River and the Kennedy Center. The tour then moved on to a more modest, but striking, one bedroom unit. Tour members also got the opportunity to see recently completed renovations of the Watergate’s residential hallways with their custom finishes.

Each of the 3 apartments was formed by combining multiple, adjacent units ranging from 2 to 4 units.

Following a brief rest in the Westchester’s sunken garden, the tour continued across the street to the Cathedral cooperative (4101 Cathedral Avenue, NW) where Carl Gerber served as our host. In contrast to its neighbor, the Westchester across the street, the Cathedral is a modern building constructed in 1963 when it opened as a rental complex. It converted to co-op in 1977. The Cathedral is currently completing extensive remodeling, including a major reconstruction of its lobby.

Tour members boarded the bus and traveled to the Northumberland (2039 New Hampshire Avenue, NW) where 2 apartments were visited. Opened as a rental in 1910, it was among the first buildings to be converted to cooperative ownership in 1920, the beginning of cooperatives in the District. Russell Adams was our host and provided a detailed description of its history and amazing lobby.

Next, and last on the tour of significant housing cooperatives, was the visit to the Altamont (1901 Wyoming Avenue, NW) where members toured a top-floor apartment and enjoyed a “tea” on the building’s roof-top pavilion. Opened as a rental in 1916, the Altamont converted to co-op in 1949. Both the pavilion and the apartment, just below the pavilion with a recessed balcony running the length of the long apartment, had wonderful views of the city skyline.

The day drew to an end at 5:00 as the bus arrived at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum where it started.

In addition to the Coalition’s thank you letters following the tour, owners of the visited apartments and townhouses received floral bouquets from the Coalition the day before the tour as an expression of appreciation for agreeing to open their homes. These flowers were paid through the generous contributions of companies that do substantial business with cooperatives (see the listing on the next page). Many tour members also expressed their appreciation to the homeowners, many who were home to answer tour member’s questions.

Responses from tour members indicated a high level of satisfaction with many asking that another tour be conducted of additional DC housing co-ops.
We are pleased to acknowledge the following companies for their very generous sponsorship of the May 20, 2006 Smithsonian tour of significant housing cooperatives:

Community Management Corporation - CMC  
Managing Great Communities Everyday  
12701 Fair Lakes Circle, Suite 400  
Fairfax, VA 22033  
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Edmund J. Flynn Company  
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Home Mortgage Specialist & Cooperative Financing Specialist  
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National CO-OP Bank  
1725 Eye Street, NW Suite 600  
Washington, DC 20006  
202-336-7700

Whiteford Taylor & Preston  
1025 Connecticut Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20036  
Joseph Douglass, Counsel to the DC Cooperative Housing Coalition  
202-659-6779
RESIDENTS WITH EMOTIONAL OR MEDICAL PROBLEMS

By Joe Douglass

Very often, cooperatives are confronted with the issue of a resident with emotional or medical problems that impair the resident’s judgment and ability to function. These problems vary, from substance abuse to Alzheimer’s Disease to psychosis. In addressing these issues, a cooperative board must be clear on the limits to its authority and power, but should be aware of practical approaches to the problem.

First, the board must remember that its legal authority is limited by the cooperative’s governing documents. The cooperative is not responsible for, and has no authority for, the care and supervision of residents with such emotional or medical problems. If the cooperative assumes such responsibility, it faces serious potential liability, and is acting beyond the scope of its legal authority. So, the options for action by the cooperative are severely limited.

The board typically will want to deal with such situations compassionately, consistent with its desire to see that the cooperative’s residents and property are not endangered. In such cases, there are several things to consider.

1. If a resident is not able to care for him/herself, or behaves in an erratic or abnormal manner, the primary responsibility for the resident rests with his or her family. If no family member or other authorized care-provider is available to care for the resident, the cooperative and its management personnel should not assume this responsibility. If management is confronted with this situation, emergency medical services should be summoned, and the resident should be transported by ambulance for medical evaluation. If the resident is released from medical care, management should not assume custody of the resident.

2. Family members should be contacted as soon as possible, and advised of the resident’s behavior, and they should be advised that the cooperative cannot be responsible for the care of their relative.

3. If a resident acts in a threatening manner, or appears to be about to commit a dangerous or unlawful act, the police should be called immediately.

4. The cooperative may seek assistance from public or private social service agencies, depending on the circumstances of each case.

5. Violations of cooperative rules may be handled through the cooperative’s standard enforcement procedure. This procedure may help to clarify the resident’s problem, and may encourage intervention from the resident’s family or others.

A person with psychiatric problems generally cannot be hospitalized against his/her will unless the person poses a threat to the safety of him/herself or others. In such cases, it is possible to petition for a court-appointed guardian, who would have legal authority (and responsibility) to supervise the person and to arrange for care, including hospitalization, if necessary. Ideally, the guardian should be a member of the person’s family.

Problems of this type are, unfortunately, very common. As the population ages, they will become more common. When these situations arise, the cooperative will be asked what it plans to do about the resident. The board should make it very clear that its legal authority does not include the medical or psychiatric care of residents. At the same time, there are resources that can be brought to bear, so that the resident in question receives the care and supervision that is necessary.

Joe Douglass is a partner in the Washington Office of Whiteford, Taylor & Preston, LLP. He serves as legal counsel to the DC Cooperative Housing Coalition.

Look for a notice about a members’ seminar this fall on this very important topic.
More photos from the Smithsonian-CHC Tour

It is difficult to convey in writing how beautiful a day May 20 was, how attractive apartments and townhouses were, and how much people enjoyed the tour.

In addition to the photos reproduced in this newsletter, Bill Keene, one of the members of the tour, very generously provided to the Coalition 2 CDs containing hundreds of beautiful photos he took during the course of the day. The Coalition hopes to load these photos on our web site (www.coopsdc.com) to share with everyone these photos that capture many different aspects of the tour.

Getting ready to begin the day, Barry Moss, Coalition tour guide, talks with the Smithsonian representative and bus driver.

Photos in this issue were taken by Mike O’Dell.
About the Coalition

The D.C. Cooperative Housing Coalition exists to advance the common interests of cooperative housing associations in the District of Columbia and promote cooperative housing as a desirable form of home ownership. It is therefore both an advocacy organization that articulates the interests of members before government officials and regulatory agencies and a service organization that provides information and education to members.

Membership is open to all District housing cooperatives, regardless of size. A volunteer board of directors, elected by member co-ops, governs the Coalition. Activities are financed through annual dues determined by the members at the annual meeting.

The Coalition grew out of an ad hoc group of District cooperatives that formed in response to a judicial ruling that had cast a cloud over many cooperatives by banning proportionate voting. By marshaling the forces of more than 3,000 units, the ad hoc group persuaded the D.C. City Council to resolve the matter.

Recognizing the importance to the cooperative housing community of speaking in a single voice and maintaining the ability to respond quickly and knowledgeably to matters affecting cooperative housing, the ad hoc group decided to form a permanent organization. The Coalition was established in 1984 and was incorporated as the DC/CHC, Inc., a nonprofit organization in the District of Columbia, in 1993.