

Sad chapter in Western Addition history ending

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(07-20) 18:13 PDT -- The city's redevelopment agency razed the Fillmore's thriving black neighborhood and business district 40 years ago, promising to revamp the area and then bring the residents and merchants back. Instead, the project languished for decades.

Today, there is a renowned jazz club, an Ethiopian restaurant and a cluster of high-rise apartment buildings. But those projects stand out in an area that has become known for its violence and is home to a number of fast-food restaurants and empty storefronts.

The San Francisco Redevelopment Agency will leave the Western Addition in January, ending a 40-year "urban renewal" project that was touted as a move to wipe out blight but actually destroyed the city's most prominent African American neighborhood.

In total, 883 businesses were shuttered and 4,729 households were forced out, according to city officials. Roughly 2,500 Victorian homes were demolished.

There are mixed feelings about the agency's departure, with some happy to see it go and others wanting more of an effort to repair the damage.

Agency officials admit that mistakes were made during the project, but a state law requires that they leave at the end of the year.

"The agency's time there has not been a happy story," said Fred Blackwell, who recently took on the title of executive director of the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency. "There have been thousands of units of affordable housing developed and a substantial investment made in the community, but those things are in no way envisioned as making up for the damage that was done in the early days.

"There is no way to make up for clearing large swaths of land and displacing thousands of people."

Defining blight

The redevelopment of the Western Addition, of which the Fillmore district is a part, was one of the largest urban renewal efforts in the West. The California Redevelopment Act of 1945

allowed cities and counties to create redevelopment areas to combat urban blight, which was defined by economics, dilapidation of housing and social conditions - including the size of the nonwhite population.

The Fillmore, where 60 percent of the residents were African American, was declared blight in 1948. The first demolition project began in 1956. The second phase, the brainchild of the redevelopment agency's then-head Justin Herman, began in 1964 and expanded the area to 60 square blocks. Eminent domain was used to purchase Victorian homes and buy out local businesses. The thriving black business community was destroyed as owners of nightclubs, barbershops, banks and retail stores were forced to close up shop.

"The agency would go to a house and give the head of household a certificate that said they would be given preference in housing built in the future," said Benjamin Ibarra, a spokesman for the agency. "But there wasn't a lot of housing built for a long time."

"People say black folks chose to sell their homes, but that's not true," said the Rev. Arnold Townsend, who has lived in the Western Addition for more than 40 years. "We couldn't get loans to fix up the houses, so we didn't have a choice but to sell or crumble. There was a mean-spiritedness that occurred during the entire process."

Though the agency promised to move people back into the neighborhood after the project was completed and help the business community recover, the area sat empty for years.

Blackwell said the agency has put \$50 million into the economic development of the area, with loans to businesses in the jazz preservation district, money to the four-block Japantown district, street improvements, lighting and landscaping and public art. He could not say how much of that went to African American-owned businesses.

"We don't have the investments broken down by race," he said.

The Rev. Amos Brown, who heads the San Francisco branch of the NAACP, has been a pastor in the area for decades. "There is still frustration, hopelessness and a negative mind-set on the part of the African American community because of what redevelopment did," he said. "In yesteryears, there was a sense of community, with Victorian homes and black-owned businesses.

"They wiped out our community, weakened our institutional base and never carried out their promise to bring people back."

In recent years, there have been some successes, like Rasselas Ethiopian restaurant, the Sheba Piano Lounge and the 1300 Fillmore restaurant, but many residents say those do not make up for the past injustices.

"Yoshi's is wonderful, but not worth destroying a community," Townsend said.

"They keep saying they invested \$50 million," said Agonafer Shiferaw, owner of Rasselas Ethiopian restaurant, "but how much of that went to African Americans? I would guess about 6 percent. If the objective is to stimulate African American economics and business, that is not enough."

Residents are planning to hold workshops to find ways to move on. They will look at how to connect with the Planning Department, Public Works and the Office of Economic Development. They plan to form more community organizations and block clubs.

Townsend is calling on the mayor to issue an official apology to the Western Addition and the black community for what was done by the redevelopment agency.

"We can't move on until that is done," the reverend said.

"There is so much resentment because people feel like they haven't been heard," said Sheryl Davis, a five-year Western Addition resident. "Nobody seems ready to deal with what's happened and fix it and move on. The people most impacted have not benefited at all. There were so many black businesses that closed and will not be able to come back.

"On the whole, people are very dissatisfied. I don't know if we can fix it."

Lesson for Bayview

Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi, whose district includes the Fillmore, said the city needs to make good on the promise of returning African Americans and the working class to the area.

"We need to legislate outcomes that make it better. We need to create housing, work and business opportunities. We need legislation that speaks to the pain and suffering."

Mirkarimi said he is concerned and apprehensive about future development projects.

The city plans to turn over 1,300 acres - more than half of the Bayview-Hunters Point area - to the Redevelopment Agency to help clean up blight, build affordable housing and

stimulate business. The project creates the largest redevelopment district in San Francisco history.

"We should look at the mistakes made in the 40 years in the Western Addition and make sure the rest of San Francisco is not having the same kind of experience," the supervisor said. "The Fillmore should be a lesson for the Bayview, not a harbinger."

At the July 10 meeting to discuss the departure of the agency from the Western Addition, dozens of residents showed up to share memories and concerns. But Francee Covington, the president of the Redevelopment Agency, told audience members they were not allowed to applaud and numerous times demanded people in the gallery be quiet.

"They expect people not to be emotional after 40 years. That's as mean as you can get," Townsend said. "We are glad they will be gone, but it would be better if they had never come."

"Our community is gone and never coming back, and that is painful."

Western Addition redevelopment project

TIMELINE

1948

Area declared blighted

1956

Demolition begins

1964

Area expanded to 60 square blocks

BY THE NUMBERS

883

Number of businesses closed

4,729

Number of households forced out

2,500

Number of Victorian homes demolished

\$50 million

Amount spent on the project

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/07/21/BA6511Q4G0.DTL>

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