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Event: Saint Paul PHA Donates Historic Book to St. Paul Public Library; Book Shows City Planned Public Housing on Mt. Airy Site in the 1930s

Place: Mt. Airy Community Center
91 East Arch Street
St. Paul, MN 55130

Date: **Thursday June 23, 2011**

Time: 9:00 – 11:00 AM

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Information about the PHA is also posted at: www.stpaulpha.org

On Thursday June 23 the St. Paul Public Housing Agency (PHA) will present an important artifact from the City's past to the St. Paul Public Library. The PHA event at the Mt. Airy Community Center, 91 East Arch Street, will feature a city planning book from the 1930's titled *Saint Paul Housing Project: A Plan for Slum Clearance and Low Cost Housing*.

The large-format book presents a proposal for slum clearance and the creation of up to 1100 low-cost rental housing units on the site near the Minnesota Capitol where the Mt. Airy Homes public housing development is now. The Mt. Airy Hi-Rise with 153 apartments and

adjacent townhomes (now 298 units) were completed in 1959. The area is now bordered by University Avenue, Highway 35E, Pennsylvania Avenue and Jackson Street.

Saint Paul Housing Project details the process by which the City Planning Board, under the guidance of City Engineer George H. Herrold and a 45-member Citizens Housing Committee, planned for clearing and redeveloping the site. Many of the documents, maps and images presented in the book were created between 1933 and 1935. Although the current Mt. Airy Homes site differs significantly from the Citizens Housing Committee's plan, the book offers a unique snapshot of St. Paul 80 years ago.

The planning process was clearly a large-scale collaboration between City government, educators, and health services departments that now fall under various City and County departments. The outcome was that the City Planning Board identified the Mt. Airy site as the area most in need of the City's intervention due to levels of poverty, health issues, and blight. For various reasons the plans were not implemented for more than two decades, however.

The book can be viewed online at the Minnesota Digital Library's "Minnesota Reflections" website, <http://reflections.mndigital.org/>

The housing plan described in the book was never implemented. The book itself stayed in the archives of the City's Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA) and then was moved to the Public Housing Agency with other public housing records when the PHA became an independent agency in 1977. PHA staff "rediscovered" the book among other records in 2010 and began researching how to preserve it while making it available as a resource to the community.

The book's significance will be discussed by a panel of affordable housing advocates and stakeholders, historians and others with a special interest in the document.

QUOTES:

PHA Board Chair Tom Reding: "This planning book is a fascinating picture of the City in the 1930's, with a focus on public health and safety, social conditions and housing needs. We are happy to present the book to the St. Paul Public Library where it will be accessible to future generations."

PHA Executive Director Jon Gutzmann: "In our day-to-day work we concentrate mostly on housing needs today and in the future. This book lets us take a long look back and see that City leaders and private citizens were concerned about similar issues then. They were making ambitious plans to improve the community by providing safe, affordable housing for low income residents. We are proud that the St. Paul PHA is successfully fulfilling that mission today."

Examples of “high performance” at the Saint Paul PHA:

- St. Paul’s public housing (now 4248 homes and apartments) has been more than 99% occupied for over 15 consecutive years. (In the private rental market, a 5-6% vacancy rate is considered “full occupancy”.)
- The PHA’s public housing units are well maintained. Maintenance requests are completed quickly. Vacant units are prepared and re-rented in an average of 13 days. Emergencies repairs are done in less than 24 hours.
- Major renovation at each site (now near completion at McDonough Homes) makes the PHA’s housing attractive, desirable communities.
- PHA residents pay their rents, in full and on time. The PHA’s collection losses are less than one percent of all rents and charges billed.
- The PHA’s independent public auditors reported “zero findings” on their annual audits of the agency’s financial transactions, records and operating practices, for 12 years in a row.
- The PHA’s Housing Choice Vouchers (4300 subsidies used in privately-owned apartments) are all in use and administered according to federal regulations.

PHA Background:

The PHA administers federal rent subsidies that provide about 20,000 Saint Paul residents with safe, affordable housing. About half of those residents live in the 4248 public housing homes and apartments that the PHA owns and manages. The other 10,000 residents use Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers to pay part of their rent in privately-owned properties.

Over half of the PHA-owned units (2548) are in 16 high-rise apartment buildings occupied by seniors, persons with disabilities and younger single people. Most of the high-rise apartments are efficiency or one-bedroom units. Almost 1300 family townhomes are divided among four housing developments. McDonough Homes is the largest family development, with 580 units spread over about 70 acres. Another 400+ families rent PHA “scattered site” homes and duplexes that are distributed throughout the city. Almost 7500 households are on the public housing waiting list. They may wait several months or several years, depending on the household’s size and other factors.

The PHA also administers the federal rent subsidy program known as “Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers”. The rental vouchers help 4300 households pay affordable rents in privately-owned apartments and rental homes. The waiting list for have Section 8 vouchers is closed, and the few families receiving vouchers now have waited years for their names to come to the top of the list. Over 11,000 households requested applications when the waiting list was opened for three days in 2007, and 4,000 are still on the list.

Families in public housing and Section 8-subsidized apartments pay about 30% of their income for rent and utilities, and the federal housing subsidy pays the rest of the cost.

The total insured value of the PHA's public housing properties is \$581 million. The total annual budget for public housing, Section 8 and related programs is about \$65 million. The Section 8 program alone will bring about \$35 million in federal funds to Saint Paul this year, most of which is then paid out as rent subsidies to private property owners. Public housing residents pay almost \$13 million a year to the PHA for rent and utilities. HUD will provide \$12 million this year for the public housing "operating subsidy" and another \$6-7 million for major modernization work. PHA staff tallied \$77 million in "deferred maintenance" and other capital needs in a recent "physical needs assessment" of public housing properties, caused by aging buildings and several years of reduced federal funding

The PHA is consistently rated as a "high performer" by HUD for both its public housing and Section 8 programs, based on performance indicators like these:

- All of the PHA's public housing units are occupied (less than ½ % vacancy,).
- PHA residents pay rent on time. The PHA's collection losses are less than one percent of all rents and charges billed.
- The PHA spends its capital grants from HUD on time, following approved plans and budgets.
- The PHA's public housing units are well maintained. Maintenance requests are completed quickly: Emergencies repairs are done in less than 24 hours, and routine requests in an average of less than 5 days.

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