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Despite millions from Columbia, West Harlem Development Corporation struggles to find affordable housing



Kirill Buskirk / Staff Photographer

In 2009, the WHDC was created to oversee the distribution of \$96 million of Columbia's \$150 million commitment to benefit the local community around Manhattanville.

By [Nelson Luna](#) | September 3, 2019, 1:50 AM

Despite receiving millions in funding from Columbia, the West Harlem Development Corporation continues to face difficulties in creating and preserving affordable housing in the area, largely due to a lack of vacant land in District 9, according to the organization's second three-year strategic plan.

In 2009, the WHDC was created to oversee the distribution of \$96 million of Columbia's \$150 million commitment to benefit the local community around Manhattanville, known as the Community Benefits Agreement. The \$96 million is further split into two funds, the Benefits Fund (\$76 million), which is allocated to nonprofits that tackle education and employment issues in the Harlem community, and the Affordable Housing Fund (\$20 million).

WHDC's plan contextualizes the CBA's progress in housing, employment, and education between 2018 and 2020. Read Spectator's main takeaways from the plan below.

1. Affordable housing efforts see little progress, though “not ... for a lack of trying.”

The Affordable Housing Fund is listed as one of the WHDC's top priorities in its efforts to help the Harlem community, as 44 percent of people in the local district spend 30 percent of their income on rent and are regarded as “rent burdened” by the plan. Phase I of the University's expansion, originally slated for completion by 2020, gave the first \$10 million of the funds to the WHDC. The second phase of the University's expansion will trigger the next \$10 million.

Though the nearly \$700,000 spent by the WHDC—4.23 percent of the total \$10 million commitment—has increased since 2018, when only [1 percent of the fund had been spent](#), the plan highlights significant obstacles to finding reasonable developments.

In 2017, the corporation considered obtaining two buildings for a total of 39 low-income affordable housing units in collaboration with development firm BRP Companies. However, the project was estimated to cost \$23 million and the partnership fell through.

In 2017 and 2018, WHDC began discussions to develop 83 or 100 units of affordable housing at 149th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, but little progress has been seen since, according to the plan. The corporation has not made progress due to “unresolved questions for the potential seller,” and the budget for the project would cost \$53 million.

The plan also outlines “very preliminary” plans for a joint venture 85-unit senior housing development and a Homeownership Assistance Program to help residents purchase affordable housing under the Housing Development Finance Corporation.

The WHDC acknowledged these setbacks in the plan and emphasized that it will look for support in developing affordable housing through subsidies, loans, tax credits, and support from the New York City council.

2. WHDC aims to invest more in its own programs rather than local nonprofits unaffiliated with the organization.

In regards to nonprofit work, the plan questions the lasting impact of the WHDC's work, especially if it continues to fund external grants outside of the organization.

Its answer: “little to none.”

In an effort to create a longer-lasting impact, the WHDC has chosen to increase investments for its own internal nonprofit work compared to that of external organizations. According to the plan, the corporation has reduced the total amount of grants per year from \$1.65 million to \$1 million with the intention of “redirect[ing] resources into more impactful direct programs operated by WHDC.” The WHDC justified its decision by citing examples of the Arise! Summer Youth Education and Employment Program and the West Harlem Skills Training Center.

The WHDC is at the preliminary stages of obtaining space for Arise! SYEEP. So far, \$16.2 million have been directed to sponsor 173 nonprofit organizations.

3. Through increased funding to internal nonprofit work, the WHDC hopes to increase employment and alleviate local poverty.

Community Board 9 has a poverty rate of 23.5 percent, and since 2011; 5 percent of the residents of District 9 was unemployed. As a result, the CBA includes the Project Labor Agreement, which outlines the [labor practices and conditions that will be in place at the new construction site](#).

Through the PLA, Columbia aims to hire more members of minority groups, women, and local workers. The CBA also funds [job training efforts and industry response-skill training](#) for small businesses. The plan cites Arise! SYEEP and West Harlem Skills Training Center as areas of growth, citing the fact that the programs will now receive more funding internally as a result of redirected grants.

4. The WHDC has seen progress in its work with local schools and student performance.

The CBA also funds nonprofits that tackle educational issues in the Harlem community due to the number of students failing state exams, citing that 69 percent of students in third through eighth grade fail their state English language arts test and 75 percent fail the state math test.

The WHDC intends to resolve these issues through programs like Arise! SYEEP and plans for a new Teachers College Community School. The CBA also intends to fund 15 internships over a span of 5 years.

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