



# Housing Justice League Newsletter November 2018

## UPCOMING EVENTS

Check [www.housingjusticeleague.org/events/](http://www.housingjusticeleague.org/events/) to confirm time, location, and event details!

**Friday, November 23, 11AM - Beltline Petition Drive** *Outside of Ponce City Market.* Join HJL volunteers as they collect signatures for our Beltline for All petition! Sign up to host a BeltLine for All petition drive! Go to [housingjusticeleague.com](http://housingjusticeleague.com), click on "BeltLine for All", click on "Host a Petition Drive," and fill out a simple form. You get to choose the time/date/location that work best and we'll make sure you have everything you need for a successful drive!

**Thursday, December 13, 6:30 pm - Tenant Organizing Training** *1040 Crew St SW Atlanta 30315.* How to start a tenant association, protect tenant rights to quality, affordable housing, and build power to stop displacement! Please email [housingjusticeleagueatl@gmail.com](mailto:housingjusticeleagueatl@gmail.com) for location and to RSVP!

**Tuesday, December 18, 7:00 pm, 6:30 pm for orientation - HJL Mass Meeting** *1040 Crew St SW 30315.* We will discuss the current status of all campaigns, the organization, and have breakouts for tenant associations, the BeltLine for All campaign, and more!



Housing Justice League (HJL) is a community-led organization. Our mission is: *"to empower renters and homeowners to self-organize and defend their right to remain. We fight to preserve affordable housing, prevent gentrification, and build neighborhood power for an Atlanta-wide housing justice movement."*

We are always looking for ways to work with and support community members dealing with housing issues. We are excited to hear your ideas and for new leadership. Come to our monthly meetings to join or start your own tenant association, volunteer for a campaign, or help with community outreach.

Go to [www.housingjusticeleague.org](http://www.housingjusticeleague.org) to sign up to volunteer, make a donation, learn about membership, or check out our upcoming events!

Follow us at [facebook.com/housingjusticeleague](https://facebook.com/housingjusticeleague) to keep up to date with what's going on in the organization and housing-related politics.

## FOREST COVE UPDATE- Written by Richard Hunsinger

### Atlanta Journal-Constitution Investigation Exposes Rampant Mold & Health Hazards in Forest Cove, Other Metro Atlanta Apartment Complexes

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution recently published a front page [report](#) investigating the unsafe living conditions and rampant mold at the Forest Cove apartments coverage wrought by limitations on the state government's power to pressure landlords to address the issue. Here, we hope to shed light on the implications for tenant health and well-being, as well as lend crucial context to give readers a better sense for the gravity of the issues.

While HUD has a written policy that states units must be free of mold and Georgia state law has its own policies requiring landlords to keep properties habitable, HUD has no national standard for mold, and Georgia law couldn't force landlords to comply to them anyway. National Housing Compliance, the Section 8 subsidy contract administrator tasked with monitoring repair requests, also has no authority to make landlords comply. Because property owners that hold Section 8 contracts are guaranteed the fair market rent for every unit they own, with or without accountability to upholding a quality standard of living, it should be no wonder that conditions often become volatile. At Forest Cove, the tenants have raised their concerns to Millennia Housing Management, only to be repeatedly put on trial, blamed, or told that it is their "responsibility" to manage the mold.

This is a structural issue that allows owners and managers to profit from guaranteed rent money without incurring any financial consequences for compliance failures. As a result, disastrous mold problems like this are widespread in low-income Black communities in the Atlanta metro area, even though there are plenty of reasonable mitigation techniques available to any willing landlord. Yet

those charged with upkeep of property have continued to neglect this issue to the point of being inhumane. The class disparity in habitability is made even more salient by a passage in the AJC article about the Georgia Department of Public Health's regulations for hotels and motels; If this was happening in some luxury hotel in Buckhead, they would be required by law to intervene. If it's hundreds of Black families in low-income apartments? Sorry, they can't help y'all. The state of Georgia, it would seem, will happily bow to a ruling class that treats Atlanta like a playground at the expense of the people that actually make this city so wonderful.

Consider that in 2013 recommendation by the state health department that legislation be developed "to ensure homes are healthy, citing concerns about exposure to mold contributing to asthma," was not enacted. And legislation introduced in the General Assembly to create a study committee on unhealthy housing, including mold issues, did not pass. In other words, the State Capitol and State legislature is responsible for the poisoning of the people it claims to represent through the absence of legal protections in Georgia tenant-landlord law that would allow tenants to withhold rent if conditions are not livable. Rather, tenants are expected, under threat of eviction, to pay rent anyway.

Another particularly disturbing detail from the AJC article is its descriptions of Clayton County judges prefacing eviction proceedings by telling tenants that any defense based on challenges with mold will be unlikely to help them, and should be omitted. This normalizes hazardous living conditions by signalling to residents that what they are experiencing is not seen as a serious or legitimate



issue deserving of the requisite attention and compassion. Such toxic gaslighting techniques are far from uncommon, though, as exemplified by the statements that MHM representatives have been delivering to Forest Cove residents through the landlords which read: “The company is not aware of any requests for repairs that have not been addressed, [Crossman] said,” even though HJL has been present in meetings where members of the tenant association have expressed their concerns directly with MHM’s Vice President & General Counsel and there are also ongoing conversations between HUD officials in Washington, D.C., the tenant association, and MHM about issues that have never been resolved. Exploitative landlords think they can just keep collecting their checks, paid for by our tax dollars, and pat themselves on the back because they give tenants half a roof in exchange for millions in subsidies.

This is why the growing Tenant Movement is so important, especially here in Atlanta. The institutions that claim responsibility for these issues are not coming to save anyone, so that means residents and the folks supporting their efforts to organize are left with the lion’s share of work as they seek to amplify this issue and facilitate a resolution. As housing becomes more and more unstable and landlords remain incentivized to by municipal, state, and federal institutions to prioritize greed, it becomes more apparent that this movement needs us all.

On that note, the Forest Cove Tenants’ Association has been organizing to address these conditions since February. To date, they have submitted petitions to HUD’s regional office here in Atlanta and the office of Congressman John Lewis; presented demands and sat down in meetings with MHM representatives; provided pictures of conditions and been on calls with the National Alliance of HUD Tenants to HUD representatives in DC, including the Deputy Assistant Secretary of

HUD, Bob Iber, All to no avail. The tenants that have come forward to make these issues known to the public are incredibly courageous for doing so, and must be supported in their efforts by all who believe that every human being has a right to live in safe, dignified housing. What they have experienced here, as outlined in this report, is a systemic failure on a national level. Tenants all over the country are organizing and mobilizing to demand the humane conditions that they deserve. It is our duty to uplift them, help tenants to organize and join this movement, and secure a future that assures all people, regardless of their income, can access safe, dignified and affordable housing.

## PEOPLESTOWN BLOCK FIGHT - *Written by Tim Franzen*

The Peoplestown residents battling the City of Atlanta’s attempts to use eminent domain as a means of taking their homes recently returned to court. Judge Schwall had directed the City to bring former city engineer and project manager over the proposed park/pond project to testify as to whether the houses that have been taken by the City were necessary to address area flooding. Emails authored by this engineer noting “no technical data” supporting the City’s proposed project, motivated Judge Schwall at an August 5, 2018 hearing to schedule another hearing to further consider whether the City had the necessary “engineering validation” to support the City’s taking of property in Peoplestown.

Resident Tanya Washington, the central subject of the hearing, as well as her neighbors on the block, have been targeted by the City for the past 5 years to take their homes to build a park, pond, waterfall and large educational gazebo.



The City has maintained that it needs every home on the block to address flooding in the neighborhood.

However, at a previous hearing the City's star witness, Department of Watershed engineer Todd Hill, was presented with a 2013 email by an engineer from his office communicating that the flooding could be addressed without the block. In response to a direct question from Judge Schwall about the veracity of the document, Todd Hill testified, "I don't know."

The outcome in this case could set a precedent that will either protect residents against these types of land grabs by the City using eminent domain or give the green light to city officials, authorizing them to steal peoples' homes under fraudulent pretenses. Resident Washington said, "I do not intend for my name to be in the caption of a case that is used to displace people in Atlanta. Five and a half years of my life has been consumed by this fight with my neighbors to defend our property against unlawful taking by the City of Atlanta. We will fight this until the bitter end!" In light of Atlanta's reputation as the City with the most economic inequality between the haves, the have nots, and the have mores, the dearth of affordable housing in the City and the rapid gentrification of Atlanta neighborhoods, this case is particularly timely and important. Housing Justice League has stood with Tanya and others fighting to stay in their homes since day one and we showed up in a big way at the Oct. 29 hearing.

The former project manager testified at the hearing that the City never produced the engineering validation they requested. Washington's engineering expert, who reviewed more than 100,000 individual documents

provided by the City, testified that the engineering data requested was not produced. The judge demanded an affidavit from the City that the required engineering analysis was produced in response to Washington's December 2016 discovery request. It also became clear at the hearing that the emails produced by the City were manipulated because they were not in chronological order and there were several identical emails with different time stamps and different spacing.

After the hearing, Tanya Washington sent this message to supporters, "We had a great day in court today!! Thank you all for your prayers, calls, tweets, texts and other expressions of support and encouragement. The City's case fell apart today in the midst of the TRUTH!! The judge began questioning witnesses about the existence of engineering modeling establishing the necessity of my home to the proposed project and the City did not and could not produce one. We will be submitting briefs to the Court at the end of the month and he will rule thereafter. I am encouraged and grateful for the outpouring of love and support. Thank you from the bottom of my heart!!"

## REDLIGHT THE GULCH

Written by Livvy Feeney

Since Mayor Bottoms made the proposed Gulch development deal public about seven weeks ago, HJL members have been working non-stop to prevent it from coming to fruition. As part of the Redlight The Gulch Coalition, we have been building power to hold the City accountable to the public, which stands to lose a great deal at the benefit of billionaire developers. The Mayor attempted to push this deal through quickly, leaving minimal space for public comment and little time for City Council to read through the dense, complex 700 page plan before voting.



Just before midnight on November 5th, after a City Council meeting that lasted more than ten hours due to the high amount of public comment and extended deliberation among council, City Council voted to pass the Gulch development proposal.

Yet the fight is not over: We are currently pursuing litigation in the hopes of resisting the deal in the courts.

### ISSUES WITH THE PLAN

The plan has had glaring issues from the beginning. The deal allows CIM, a billionaire developer which the LA Times referred to as a “slumlord”, to create a corporate “mini city” in the 40 acre Gulch area downtown. The development would be in a TAD (Tax Allocation District), which means that a portion of the property tax from that area would go into the development for a certain amount of time. This is the same funding mechanism as the BeltLine; it relies on stimulating gentrification, thereby raising property values and generating revenue for the City from property taxes. Due to pressure applied by the Redlight Coalition, the TAD will be capped at 20 years instead of the original 30 years the developers asserted they needed at the beginning of the proposal. This dropped the public cost from \$2.5 billion to \$1.6 billion. This is a move in the right direction, but it doesn’t change the fact that the public will still own NOTHING in the development; it will be completely privately owned.

Proponents of the deal claim that it will bring new jobs – yet we know that employers will come into the city with or without the Gulch development. They come here for our talent, universities, and airport, which won’t change if the Gulch is developed. The deal also claims to prioritize affordable housing, but does just the opposite: the deal only allocates about 2.3% of its public subsidy to affordable housing. They have promised to 200 units of “affordable housing” at 80% Area Median Income, which is obviously not affordable for the vast majority of Atlantans. Also, these rental units can be sold after three years, virtually guaranteeing an increase in rental cost.



## REDLIGHT THE GULCH COALITION ACTION

The Redlight Coalition has been building out a base and speaking out against this deal at every step of the process. After City Council voted down a proposal for an independent review of the deal, the Redlight Coalition provided their own independent review, all of whom cited the multiple ways this deal picks the pockets of the public at the benefit of billionaires. The coalition drew a lot of media attention to the issue, including articles from the AJC, WABE, Curbed Atlanta, and others. We showed the City that they can't just sneak corporate disaster developments by us, which will hopefully be in their minds in the future as the city continues to grow.

They also drew attention to the abysmal lack of real public input in the deal. As HJL organizer Richard Hunsinger wrote, "Here, it's important to point out that these spaces for public engagement on the deal had to be forced. Initially, the mayor and the developers, CIM Group, wanted this to go through with little to no scrutiny. After it got held up by City Council during the first attempted vote, a giant PR campaign, with City Hall's blessing and assistance, was launched. People were pretty justifiably pissed that their elected officials and municipal government were actively shilling for billionaires."

Yet this is an ongoing pattern in Atlanta's development history, dating as far back as the 1996 Olympics and as recently as the construction of the Mercedes Benz stadium. From the beginning, the City manufactured support for this deal while leaving little space for dissent or public opinion: Driven by the City and CIM, Greenlight The Gulch made robo calls to residents and mailed out Greenlight propaganda materials widely. On the day of the vote, many people saw City Council member Cleta Winslow handing out Greenlight the Gulch shirts. A few green-shirted people told us

they were paid \$20 and given free lunch to wear green shirts. These were presumably paid for by our public tax dollars. Even the Wifi login page at City Hall had a big "Greenlight the Gulch" message on it.

On the day of the vote, we had a huge turnout for a Redlight the Gulch Rally on the steps of City Hall. Countless concerned residents offered eloquent and powerful public comments decrying the implications of the development, and our presence in the council chambers was palpable. So although the plan went through, Council clearly heard our message and our organizing had a material effect on their decision-making process. HJL commends the city council members who took a stand against the development and voted No despite pressure: Andre Dickens, Natalyn Archibong, Amir Farokhi, Jennifer Ide, Matt Westmoreland and Howard Shook.

Yet the fight continues! HJL and others are still resisting the Gulch plan through litigation. Our legal expert has already warned Council that the sales tax exemption part of the scheme is unconstitutional. Preventing this scheme from going through would save every family in the city \$13,000. However, litigation is not cheap, even with attorneys working at steeply cut rates. We'll need to raise \$30,000 quickly to pay the legal team to prepare filings and object at the bond validation hearings and, if necessary, to appeal.

Donate to the GoFundMe to fund the litigation:  
<https://www.gofundme.com/redlight-gulch-litigation>

Go to [redlightthegulch.com](http://redlightthegulch.com) for more info.



On Saturday, November 10, HJL members attended the DSA's annual Douglas Debs Dinner and were awarded the 2018 Douglas Debs Award.

Franklin Mack, a longtime Atlanta resident and dedicated, valued member of Housing Justice League had this to say about the event: "It made be very proud to be a member of the Housing Justice League of Atlanta at DSA Dinner. To be recognized by a national organization for the work we do makes all our efforts worthwhile. Sometimes we do not get the recognition or thanks from those that our work directly impacts."

## CONTRIBUTE TO THIS NEWSLETTER!

We are looking for volunteers to contribute to our newsletter. Join us!

We aim to have a collaborative, network-oriented and community-centered writing process that pairs impacted or involved individuals with volunteer writers/editors. We hope the stories we publish can thread together individual, building-wide, and city-wide struggles and explore their connections to broader systems of oppression and public policy. To this end, we strongly encourage reflection on how identity intersects with displacement and gentrification. Some examples of this include commentary on policing, incarceration, housing instability, environmental justice, privatization of education and large-scale development, and the selling out of communities

If you want to contribute to the newsletter in any capacity listed above, please consider the following guidelines:

1. *HJL's Code of Conduct (found on our website)*
2. *Education AND action are both important and interdependent*
3. *True change is systemic and requires fundamentally dismantling dominant power structures (i.e. white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and exploitative economic and political systems) through resisting and challenging these systems.*
4. *We understand the housing crisis and issues of displacement and dispossession as rooted in the exploitation and oppression of the Black and Indigenous communities on whose backs the United States was built. Contributions should reflect this legacy.*
5. *Low-income and Black folks have the right to self-determination and community control. Having wealth does not give someone the right to force them out of their community.*

To sign up to contribute, go to [housingjusticeleague.com](http://housingjusticeleague.com), click "News," click "Volunteer with the Newsletter", fill out a short form, and we will get back to you. Thank you!