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Sources Revealed | Elinor Bacon

In love with city life

The daughter of a city planner, Elinor Bacon is an urbanist through and through. She worked with the Department of Housing and Urban Development on Hope VI grants, headed the National Capital Revitalization Corp. and started E.R. Bacon Development LLC, part of the team redeveloping the Southwest waterfront. Development is in her blood. [Interview by Sarah Krouse](#)

How has your work on Hope IV grants with HUD stayed with you throughout your career? The Hope VI program is probably the most important urban revitalization program that HUD has run for many years. The program resonated with me in terms of trying to revitalize cities. It is about transforming really bad, severely distressed housing for low income people, but it's also about bringing in middle income people to create mixed-income housing developments that blend into the fabric of a city. My interest in it is socially based. I like to help low-income people, but I also love cities.

Do you think it was a good thing to fold NCRC into the deputy mayor's portfolio? I do. We were able to do some things at NCRC that we probably wouldn't have been able to do otherwise. But I think in this city it works well to have all of the projects under the deputy mayor with council oversight. It was the right thing to do, no question.

The Southwest waterfront was one of the NCRC's projects, and now you're part of the development team. What made you stick with it? When I was at HUD, we'd go down to the waterfront for celebrations and parties, and I was always shocked at how beautiful it was and how it wasn't capturing its potential. It seemed like a hugely missed opportunity. NCRC worked with the Office of Planning to make a development plan that was approved by council, and at the time there were all of these 99-year leases. The Redevelopment Land Agency owned the underlying land, but not the buildings. So while I was at NCRC, we bought the Gangplank, which gave us a stake in the waterfront, which was absolutely fundamental to what's happening now. When I heard the city was putting out a proposal to redevelop it, I jumped on it immediately. I called PN Hoffman and Struever Bros., and we put together a great team and won the project against 17 other teams.

How is the project going? We have been working with the city since 2006 to work out all of the details of the land-disposition agreement. We are also working with leaseholders like Phillips Seafood, Zanzibar and the Capital Yacht Club to work out agreements, which are in the final stages of completion. We had approval from the D.C. Council for \$198 million in public financing for infrastructure. We are confident in our ability to raise equity.

At least half of the people working on the project will have to be D.C. residents. How is that going? One of my jobs as a partner is to do outreach in wards 5, 6, 7 and 8 so that when we actually get going, they'll be ready for our

business and job opportunities. Our team also agreed to give \$1 million to the Workforce Intermediary Program that will be headed by the city. That will connect people who want jobs with training and then jobs.

What is your vision for D.C. coming out of this tough time? I think this time should be filled with excitement. So many things are happening or are ready to happen. The old convention center site is going to be amazing. The Yards, the transformation of the former Waterside Mall, our project in Southwest, the baseball stadium area, Hope VI projects east of the river — the list goes on and on.

Tell me about your work with the stimulus. In development there's a very long lead time. I have to be able to pay the mortgage and eat until we close on financing, so I've always combined consulting with development. I'm working with the D.C. Housing Authority to get part of the \$1 billion in competitive stimulus funds available. There was \$4 billion allocated in the budget for public housing and \$3 billion of that went out on a formula basis. All of the housing authorities in the country are competing for the other \$1 billion.

Do you think your vision of multi-income housing makes revitalization projects seem less like gentrification? Yes. I also think the D.C. government does a great job in preserving opportunities for lower-income people. On the Southwest waterfront, we're required to make 30 percent of the units affordable for those making 60 percent of the median income or less. People of quite low income will be able to rent and buy at the Southwest waterfront, which is a premier site in the city.

Has your view of mixed-income housing ever caused conflicts with other developers? No, I don't worry about that. When I first went to work as a housing inspector in Baltimore back in the 1970s, my boss said, "No woman is going to work for me," but I did. I was one of the first women developers, and people said, "No you can't be a developer," and I am. I wasn't trying to be a feminist, but I wanted to do this, so I did.

What is your favorite historic building or adaptive reuse in the District? It's not just a single building, it's the entire community — I love the 14th Street corridor. It used to have car dealerships, auto repair lots and big industrial buildings, and I think what happened there is a really good example of what a city can do. The development incorporated old buildings with the new ones. It's an amazing example of adaptive reuse.



Video

Elinor Bacon talks about working on the public and private sides of real estate and why she likes 14th Street.

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