

# Has the “Vision for Growing an Inclusive City” Turned into Reality?

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When Tony Williams became mayor of the District of Columbia in 1999, the city faced stark economic, demographic, and geographic divisions. Neighborhoods in the upper Northwestern quadrant, on Capitol Hill, and those adjacent to the Montgomery and Prince George’s County borders had stable population sizes and relative affluent residents. However, many neighborhoods elsewhere in the city were still suffering from several decades of blight and abandonment.

As shown in Table 1, 2000 was the nadir of DC’s population during the 20th century, following 50 years of population losses.

**Table 1: Population and housing trends in Washington DC, 1940-2015**

Year	Population	Housing Units	Vacancy	Owner-occupied
1940	663,091	185,128	5.4	29.9
1950	802,178	229,738	2.1	31.5
1960	763,956	262,641	4.0	30.0
1970	756,510	278,327	5.7	28.2
1980	638,333	277,249	8.6	35.5
1990	606,900	278,489	10.4	38.0
2000	572,059	274,845	9.6	40.8
2010	601,723	296,719	10.1	42.0
2015	647,484	303,312	9.9	41.2

Sources: Decennial Census (1990-2010), American Community Survey (2015); Manson et al (2017).

To address the economic and social inequities across DC’s neighborhoods, the Williams administration and the DC City Council developed an ambitious plan, titled “Vision for Growing an Inclusive City”. The plan proposed a multi-pronged approach to reduce spatial inequalities in housing, transportation, education, employment, and environment. Language throughout the plan recognizes the dual challenges: attracting new residents and businesses and accommodating growth, while trying to maintain affordability and protect long-term, lower-income residents. Key among the plan’s wide-ranging goals were to:

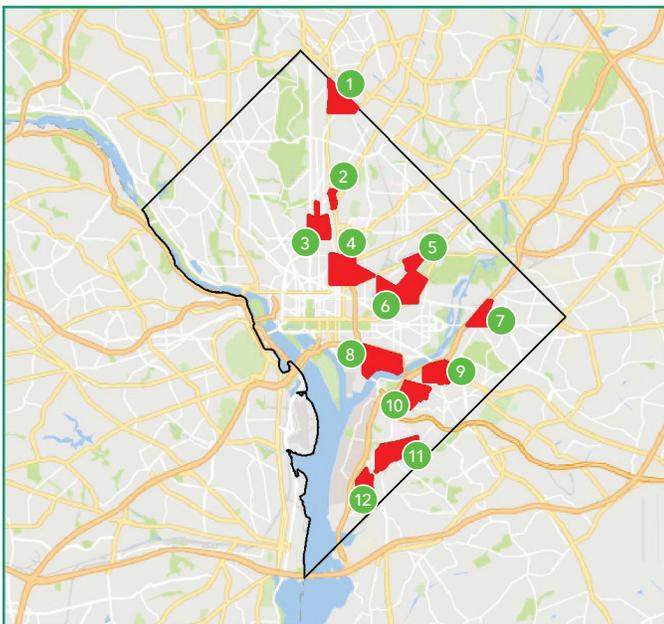
- Increase density around Metro stations and along designated main roads;
- Encourage mixed-use development, rather than single-use office buildings, in Downtown DC;
- Accommodate more affordable housing in areas with higher priced homes (such as upper Northwest), and more market rate housing in areas with lower-priced homes; and
- Focus government and private investment in emerging neighborhood centers.

A distinctive feature of the plan is how explicitly it targets a subset of geographic areas as the focal points for coordinated investment. For instance, although large swathes of the city east of 16th Street are described as “Disadvantaged” or “Emerging”, the plan does not advocate policies that disperse resources across all of those areas. Rather, it identifies 12 neighborhoods as “Strategic Neighborhood Investment Program” (SNIP) areas, where public and private investments should be concentrated to strengthen neighborhood centers.

The SNIP areas are mostly described as “Transitioning” or “Emerging” - neighborhoods that still fall short along several economic and population indicators, but where there was perceived market demand that could attract people and businesses. Several of these - including Shaw, Columbia Heights and H Street Northeast - were ground zero for the 1968 riots, with blocks still marred by boarded-up houses and vacant lots. The stated criteria for selecting SNIPs include the presence of strong anchor institutions; potential private or philanthropic partners; good access to Metro and major arterial streets; areas of land owned by the District and other public entities; and

housing and commercial development opportunities. The twelve SNIP areas are shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1 Strategic Neighborhood Investment Program (SNIP) areas**



**SNIP areas:**

- |                           |                             |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Takoma                 | 7. Minnesota Ave/Benning Rd |
| 2. Georgia Ave/Petworth   | 8. Near Southeast Navy Yard |
| 3. Columbia Heights       | 9. Penn Ave SE/Fairlawn     |
| 4. Shaw/Howard University | 10. Historic Anacostia      |
| 5. Ivy City/Trinidad      | 11. Congress Heights        |
| 6. H Street               | 12. Bellevue                |

Source: A Vision for Growing an Inclusive City.

## How closely does recent housing development match targeted neighborhoods?

During the years since the “Vision” plan was published, DC’s housing market has boomed. More than 28,000 homes were added to the housing stock between 2000 and 2015, for an annualized growth rate of 0.7%. Even with the additional supply, median monthly rents rose by an average 3.1% per year, while house prices rose by an average 5.7% per year, according to Census data<sup>1</sup>. The gains in home values were welcome news to long-term homeowners, and provided the District’s government with more revenues for public services. But for renters and lower-income residents, the rapid rise in housing costs raised concerns over the decreasing affordability of many neighborhoods - including some of the SNIP areas.

Housing markets are notoriously localized: changes in prices can vary substantially within quite small geographic areas. Similarly, the amount of housing development and renovation differed across DC’s neighborhoods during this period. An analysis of building permit data from the District’s administrative records reveals distinct patterns in housing investments.<sup>2</sup>

Most of the residential construction activity in DC consisted of additions and alterations to existing structures, rather than ground-up new construction (Table 2). Only four percent of residential building permits were for new buildings. However, most new buildings were high-rise apartments or condominiums, so the total number of housing units far exceeds the number of building permits. Reconfigurations of existing structures can also generate additional housing units. For instance, many of the building permits for additions involve converting rowhouses from single-family houses into multiple apartments or condos, which increases the total stock. Such conversions may not improve housing affordability, when they include substantial upgrades to the quality of the existing structure.

<sup>1</sup> Rents and prices measured in constant 2016 dollars.

<sup>2</sup> For more details on data and methodology, see Schuetz (2017).

**Table 2: Residential construction permits by type, 2008-2016**

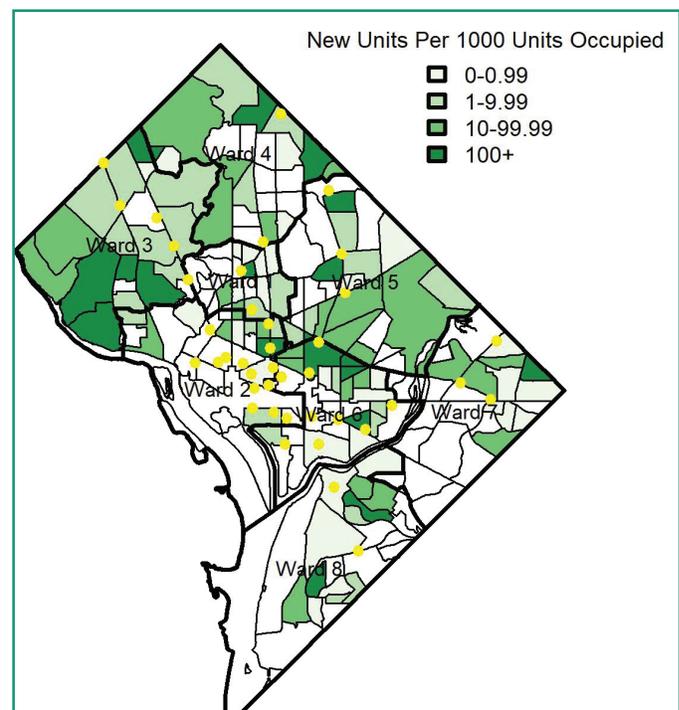
Permit Type	Number	% permits
Addition	3,928	9.6
Alteration	29,414	72.0
New building (permits)	1,635	4.0
New building (units)	11,003	na
Other construction	5,890	14.4
<b>Total construction permits</b>	<b>40,867</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Author's calculations using DC building permits from [opendata.dc.gov](https://opendata.dc.gov).

A visual analysis of new housing permits shows that development during this time period was highly concentrated spatially (Figure 2). In 50 of the District's 178 census tracts, no permits for new housing units were issued. In another 50 tracts, between 1 and 10 housing units were permitted. At the other end of the distribution, 12 census tracts had permits for more than 500 new housing units. Some of the highest intensity tracts were located in SNIP areas: Columbia Heights, U Street-Shaw-Howard, Navy Yards, and Minnesota Ave. But other areas were not explicitly targeted for growth: such as Cleveland Park, Van Ness-UDC, and L'Enfant Plaza. With the exception of Minnesota Ave, the SNIP areas east of the Anacostia have seen very little new housing development.

**Figure 2: New housing units, 2008-2016**

The "Vision" plan consisted of multiple programs aimed at different parts of the city and intending to influence different outcomes. This brief offers a high-level overview of the relationship between the plan and subsequent housing development. Details of the plan's component policies and their impacts on the city's development is an area for future research.



Source: [opendata.dc.gov](https://opendata.dc.gov), DC Government; American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau