

New Columbia Background Information

Why Replace Columbia Villa?

Columbia Villa, built more than 60 years ago as housing for WWII shipyard workers, is the type of distressed public housing targeted for replacement by the federal HOPE VI grant program. Although hidden by ongoing and extensive maintenance, crumbling infrastructure and inferior building design create significant deficiencies that are a potential danger to residents and represent an increasing maintenance cost and financial liability to the Housing Authority of Portland. Also, the outdated site plan creates physical and social isolation from the surrounding community.

Substandard Housing

The buildings of Columbia Villa fall woefully short of modern building standards in virtually all areas: plumbing, electrical, ventilation, fire safety, and accessibility. The vast majority contain materials, namely lead paint and asbestos, which have been determined to present significant health risks. Ongoing mitigation and containment of these risks present a constant and expensive maintenance challenge. Any single one of these problems is perhaps fixable, but in the aggregate they are overwhelming and demand a total replacement of the buildings.

Crumbling Infrastructure

The site is plagued with a number of ongoing and worsening problems stemming from obsolete underground infrastructure. Unfortunately, due to the underground nature of these problems, permanent repairs are cost prohibitive and, in some cases, impossible to perform without evacuating the site. Every year these systems deteriorate further, contributing to escalating maintenance costs and safety concerns. Additionally, many of these systems do not meet current building, safety and health standards.

Physical and Social Isolation

An internal street system, connecting at only three points with the surrounding grid system, effectively isolates the site from the larger community as well as clearly identifying it as public housing. The physical separation fosters social and economic isolation, resentment, fear and stigmatization. The buildings are arranged in a low-density pattern with wide areas of unclaimed space between them. As well as an inefficient use of land, the design creates large, poorly lit and unsupervised areas. Every building is adjacent to this sort of indefensible and dangerous space.

The cost of maintaining the deteriorating buildings and infrastructure of Columbia Villa increases every year, draining precious Housing Authority resources from other facilities and programs. Following are just some of the many chronic and worsening deficiencies of Columbia Villa.

Deteriorated lateral sewers

- Failing lateral lines seep raw sewage into the ground
- Obsolete design vents sewer gas through rain drains near buildings

Inadequate water service system

- With only two meters, line failure can cut water to the entire site
- Water lines—only 9” below grade—are prone to freezing

Electrical systems

- Inadequate number and spacing of outlets leads to “piggybacking”
- Obsolete cloth wire insulation has become brittle
- Meters serving 25 percent of the units are ungrounded

Plumbing

- Decayed and leaking pipes cause structural rotting
- In duplex units, a single shut-off valve serves both units
- Kitchen sinks are wet-vented to bathroom sinks in half of the units

Mechanical systems

- Interior gas appliances draw combustion air from the living space
- Exterior furnace vents are located adjacent to bedroom windows

Fire Safety

- There are no firewalls between dwelling units or in attics
- There is no fire blocking between electrical outlets in common walls

Accessibility

- Less than 1 percent of the residences are fully accessible
- Bathrooms are too small to accommodate wheelchairs and walkers
- Antiquated design renders playgrounds inaccessible to the disabled

Mechanical Ventilation

- Condensation in bathrooms creates rotting floors, joists and wall sills
- Furnace intakes near bathrooms, draw high humidity air, which deteriorates heat exchangers, mixing combustion gases with room air
- Unventilated units are prone to mold and mildew growth, which is especially dangerous for the young, the elderly and the disabled

Inadequate site drainage

- Lateral drains have collapsed over the years, preventing drainage
- Non-structural fill has compacted, causing severe depressions prone to creating ponds during six months of the year
- Depressions cause chronic roadway potholes and sidewalk cracking