

# Residents Have Varying Responses to whether Redevelopment of St. Elizabeth's East Is "For Us"

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Long before gentrification physically displaces low-income residents from their changing neighborhoods, rapid redevelopment can diminish their [sense of belonging](#). The perspectives of long-time residents surrounding the changing St. Elizabeth's East campus in Ward 8 of Washington, DC, provide a glimpse into this phenomenon.

In recent interviews and focus groups, a team of researchers at the Urban Institute asked residents of Congress Heights, the neighborhood that encompasses St. Elizabeth's East on three sides, about their perspectives on the campus's redevelopment. The findings provide insight into how creative [placemaking](#) and economic mobility initiatives might help ameliorate the "that's not for us" feelings many residents experience when they see construction cranes coming into their formerly disinvested neighborhoods.

These and other data collection efforts, such as a survey of neighbors, are part of an ongoing research project Urban has been conducting in partnership with the Emerson Collective, an impact investment and philanthropic organization, to ensure the value of the new development is shared equitably with long-time neighbors who have low incomes.

## HISTORY OF THE ST. ELIZABETH'S CAMPUS

The St. Elizabeth's campus was once a sprawling 350-acre psychiatric institution. The [complex history](#) of the hospital includes infamous residents like expatriate American poet Ezra Pound and John W. Hinckley Jr., who attempted to assassinate Ronald Reagan in 1981 and was institutionalized there until 2016. Regionally, the campus is best known for the massive amount of new development it has introduced to Ward 8 since 2010.

Of the 23 Congress Heights residents we spoke to in our recent interviews and focus groups, 20 described their sense of alienation from the St. Elizabeth's campus writ large—not just in its current form, but in days gone by. In fact, almost every member of the focus groups, save one older teen, did not consider the St. Elizabeth's campus part of Congress Heights, even though [recent DC planning documents](#) locate it there.

The residents we spoke to alluded to the stigma that has surrounded the St. Elizabeth campus's history as a psychiatric hospital. When discussing the St. Elizabeth's development, one person noted, "Historically, this, this area has been underappreciated for a very, very long time. For example, MLK used to be called Asylum Ave." He went on to pose the question, "So if you lived on the street that was called Asylum Ave, how would that make you feel?"

Another resident recollected that growing up in the area the campus was something like a haunted playground, a place friends dared each other to go; she reflected that the unwelcoming, abandoned campus contributed to the area's negative perceptions and perpetuate the sentiment that "nobody wanted to come here."

## CURRENT DEVELOPMENT IN CONGRESS HEIGHTS

Today, the St. Elizabeth's campus still has a small psychiatric hospital on the site, but the west half is now the home of the Department of Homeland Security, which began its move there in 2010. Since 2012 when it was approved by District government for redevelopment, the east half of the campus has been dramatically altered by the advent of new [health care facilities](#), [mixed-income for-sale and rental housing](#), and an [entertainment and sports arena](#) that hosts the Washington Mystics.

In 2018, the Emerson Collective partnered with the local development firm Redbrick LMD to redevelop Parcel 15 of Saint Elizabeth's East. Emerson's specific focus has been on the interim Retail Village at [Sycamore & Oak](#), a 23,000-square-foot open-air mall constructed of eco-friendly mass timber with spaces for locally and Black-owned restaurant, retail, green grocer, and fitness enterprises, as well as for performances, art, small business incubation, and job training. The current Sycamore & Oak structure is temporary. [Phase 2](#) will transition the space into a permanent town square featuring a similar mix of features, as well as affordable workforce housing, an office building, and a hotel.

## COMMUNITY REACTIONS TO DEVELOPMENT

New development in DC's historically disinvested "east of the river" neighborhoods, including Ward 8, is changing the demographics of the area. The [racial and ethnic composition](#) has become less Black, and the [share of Black home owners](#) has dropped in recent years.

Long-term residents have mixed, but mostly negative, views on what the gentrification of Congress Heights means for them. Many residents we spoke to expressed concerns around rising costs and fingered the [St. Elizabeth's] development as a factor contributing to gentrification, rising neighborhood costs, and displacement, saying, for example, "[when] long term residents see cranes go in the sky and see new developers come to the neighborhood, they automatically think gentrification—and in a negative way and a negative impact. All the prices for the houses are gonna skyrocket. They're gonna put us out. We've been here all of our lives. We don't want it."

A few others observed that new movers to the area are demographically distinct from the area's existing residents in that they appear to have much higher incomes. One resident said this was specifically true of the residents of newly built apartments and townhomes, such as many of the residences on the Saint Elizabeth's East campus. The observation that Saint Elizabeth's East is like a "gated community without the gate," was met with agreement by some other focus group members. Safety—especially safety of children—came up throughout our conversations with residents. Though perspectives differed, multiple residents noted higher levels of police presence on campus than in the nearby neighborhoods, which they found especially upsetting given the [notable spike in violent crime](#) affecting Ward 8 neighborhoods since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interestingly, resident perceptions of Sycamore & Oak were different. In a survey of 36 Congress Heights residents, a large majority of both homeowners and renters (93 percent and 77 percent) said that they would be using the space frequently and only one respondent claimed that they wouldn't use the space at all. One resident echoed perceptions we found across interviews, focus groups, and the survey: "Talking with my neighbors and my mom and people who've been here for years, they're excited about [Sycamore & Oak.] They're excited to be a part. And one thing that [they] did great when they first started developing [it was] the community input... it makes us feel part, makes us feel welcome ...that you consider the residents have been here long term... We wanna be a part of it. We can't wait to see what's next... Sycamore & Oak is a retail village that's for us, by us." This person's enthusiasm for Sycamore & Oak carried over into her being one of our few in-person respondents who thought other campus features, like the affordable housing, add up to "the entire Saint Elizabeth development is for us." Another resident

noted that, even if displacement is happening, “[Sycamore & Oak] is a place to congregate, a place for people to hang out and connect, you’ll see people feeling that level of familiarity coming back, hanging out with their networks [who] are still there.”

## FINDINGS BASED ON COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

This more nuanced mix of views about the changing St. Elizabeth’s campus highlights the potential importance of creative [placemaking](#) for maintaining and creating social networks, places to congregate, and a base for community care and culture for the residents most affected by rapid redevelopment. Though more research is needed, these views also suggest that fostering intangibles, such as a sense of belonging and shared space for old and new residents alike, may equal or exceed the value of bricks and mortar in driving inclusive access to and use of new services and amenities—at least during the earliest phases of gentrification.

Future components of Urban’s research partnership with Emerson will include exploration of emerging approaches for using equitable economic development in formerly disinvested places to close the [racial wealth gap](#), and how these might apply to the new retail village. These [community wealth-building models](#) include innovative ideas like [neighborhood real estate investment trusts](#), [community equity endowments](#), and [cash transfers to low-income people for asset-building purposes](#).

We will be investigating the potential of such methods for creating real benefits, including wealth, for existing residents of changing neighborhoods, especially when paired with efforts to fully include those residents from the start.

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This document summarizes preliminary takeaways from an ongoing research project Urban is conducting with the Emerson Collective. These takeaways may change as the project continues. For questions, contact [govaffairs@urban.org](mailto:govaffairs@urban.org).

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