



# A Community's Quandary

## Redevelopment in Camden, N.J., leaves families fighting to keep their homes

Couples cross their thresholds when they marry. Children seek refuge in them during storms. Adults long to return to them when they're away. Those blessed with long lives often want nothing more than to grow old in them.

Family homes can come to feel almost like family members, bearing witness to the most important events in people's lives. It's why no word makes a homeowner's heart sink faster than "displacement."

In Camden, N.J., well-intentioned, city-backed economic development plans that promise new jobs, increased consumer activity, and a surge in municipal revenue have exposed a dramatic downside for the poor—the displacement of thousands of low-income residents forced to give up homes that have sometimes been in the family for generations.

"New Jersey is in this building frenzy," notes Douglas Gershuny, deputy director of litigation and advocacy at LSC-funded South Jersey Legal Services (SJLS). "Everything is being fast-tracked, so it's very hard to get [local leaders] to slow down and think about what they're doing. They seem to be building for the sake of building, without looking at

the consequences in these communities."

For more than a decade, SJLS has helped low-income residents of southern New Jersey communities preserve and protect their family homes through the work of its Community Economic Development Unit. SJLS helps families confront a wide range of housing-related issues, including discrimination, gentrification, predatory lending, and environmental justice.

In New Jersey, municipalities are granted eminent domain authority to force a sale of private land by an article in the state constitution which allows for the redevelopment of "blighted areas." If a neighborhood is determined to be blighted, or "detrimental to the safety, health, morals, or welfare of the community," private property can be "taken or acquired" by the municipality to be redeveloped and improved.

One of the neighborhoods being targeted in Camden is Cramer Hill, a predominantly Hispanic community that runs along the Camden waterfront. Gershuny calls the neighborhood "very viable," but the Camden City Council disagrees. In an ambitious revitalization project first approved during the summer of 2004 and subsequently reap-

**ABOVE:** The mural on the side of the Camden office of South Jersey Legal Services depicts images of a vibrant, unified community. The Camden City Council caused a rift in that community with its plans to displace families from their homes. SJLS attorneys are representing more than 30 low-income homeowners who do not wish to sell their property to the city.

proved in February 2005, the City of Camden plans to replace the private homes and public housing with an attractive waterfront marina, retail outlets, a golf course, and condominiums to attract middle and upper-middle income residents. The current residents of Cramer Hill—numbering nearly 1,200 families, including many homeowners—would be relocated "elsewhere" under the proposal, according to the city council, Gershuny says.

"Elsewhere" isn't good enough for Mary Cortes, who has fought looming displacement as a member and past president of the Cramer Hill Residents Association, which



**LEFT:** SJLS attorneys recently filed an *amicus* brief with the U.S. Supreme Court in the case of *Kelo v. New London*, which is examining the constitutionality of using eminent domain powers for urban renewal purposes.

**BELOW:** The Camden legal services building itself was set to be acquired and razed until local leaders intervened.

**PHOTOS:** Courtesy of SJLS/Alice Gershuny

was incorporated with SJLS' assistance after Camden announced its redevelopment plan. "Cramer Hill is one of the best sections of Camden," Cortes says. "There is no blight here. This is a place where everyone helps each other out with their children. We all know everybody's relatives, everybody's fights and arguments. It's a family."

A first-time homeowner like many in the community, Cortes bristles at the idea of her cherished home being replaced with pricier housing for people in higher-income brackets and with businesses intended to draw tourists. Camden and its waterfront are "in the middle of everywhere," Cortes notes, with easy access from the New Jersey Turnpike, the

Atlantic City Expressway, and Philadelphia.

Some neighborhood residents suspect that racial demographics played a part in the city's decision-making process. Gershuny and Cortes estimate that the population of the community is half Hispanic, one-quarter African-American, and one-quarter Asian and white. "I'm angry," Cortes admits. "It hurts to leave the house that we've spent every single penny on, to start all over again somewhere else where we may not even be welcome."

Cortes need not worry about packing up her belongings just yet. Superior Court Judge Francis Orlando issued a temporary restraining order on April 8 in response to a motion

SJLS filed on behalf of its Cramer Hill clients. The order barred the city from taking residents' homes until they could produce affidavits from the homeowners indicating that they had not been coerced into selling. The majority of the neighborhood's residents speak Spanish, but the letter from the city discussing the terms of the sale was written only in English.



Meanwhile, SJLS attorneys are representing more than 30 low-income homeowners who do not wish to sell their property to the city. These clients are filing lawsuits challenging the redevelopment proposals on a variety of federal and state grounds, sometimes under anti-discrimination and environmental protection laws.

"We've filed a state constitutional argument that basically says all land use regulation, planning, zoning, and redevelopment puts a mandate on the city to provide affordable housing that would include everybody, not just some," Gershuny says. "They're basically taking property from the poor and giving it to the non-poor, so we're challenging that."

SJLS also recently filed an *amicus* brief with the U.S. Supreme Court on behalf of three clients in the case of *Kelo v. New London*, a case which is examining the constitutionality of using eminent domain powers for urban renewal and redevelopment purposes. The outcome could have a direct impact on the program's advocacy for its Cramer Hill clients.

While many of SJLS's efforts have been successful in preserving clients' homes, the program has ruffled some feathers along the way. In fact, while reviewing the city's redevelopment plans for the Cramer Hill neighborhood several months ago, a staff attorney noticed that the SJLS office itself was on the city's list to be razed. After much fanfare in the media—and following personal pleas from State Rep. Robert Andrews and a variety of community leaders—the City Council amended the plan and removed the legal services building from the "to be acquired" list.

"We're not completely in the clear, but it seems like we're just about there," SJLS deputy director Ann Gorman says. "Of course, our clients aren't so fortunate." ■