



Mpact Podcast Episode 79

A New Model for Public Housing at Sun Valley

With Erin Clark, Chief Real Estate Investment Officer, Denver Housing Authority

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Unedited Transcript

Grace Crunican (0s): Welcome to the Mpact Podcast This is Grace Crunican, Interim CEO of Mpact, formerly known as Rail~Volution. More than a year ago, we launched our new name and tagline, Mpact: Mobility, Community, Possibility We are a national organization working at the intersection of transit, related mobility options and community development. The podcast is a chance to hear from a range of voices as we go deeper into how we leverage transit to make communities better for people.

Jeff Wood (42s): Hey there. I'm Jeff Wood, principal of The Overhead Wire and your host. This month on the Mpact Podcast, we're joined by Erin Clark, Chief Real Estate Investment Officer of the Denver Housing Authority. We chat about the redevelopment of Sun Valley, a public housing project built in the 1950s that is being reinvigorated by new investments in public housing, parks and community Stay with us...

Erin Clark, welcome to the podcast.

Erin Clark (1m 15s): Thank you so much.

Jeff Wood (1m 17s): Well thanks for joining us. Before we get started, can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Erin Clark (1m 21s): Yeah, so I'm Erin, nice to meet you. I'm an urban planner and a real estate attorney and so I came to urban planning very organically through college and studied sociology and architecture. And I didn't know that urban planning was a thing. I thought I'd created something really new and then I was like, oh, people are already doing this. Great, okay, I'm going to do that. But really just thought about how the way that spaces are designed can either

hinder connection between individuals in different groups or help foster connectivity and I want to remove those impediments and help increase the connectivity.

And so yeah, loved working in land use but overall really wanted to be more proactive and focusing on development and how to coordinate all the different folks that get together to build thoughtful spaces. And then realized everything is layered on top of property law and our zoning codes and statutory things. And so I thought I'd go learn some of that too. So I added law, real estate law so that I could use those tools as well. But went to law school not to be a lawyer. I went to law school to help be a better planner developer. And so, and now I get to bring all this together in the affordable housing development space.

Jeff Wood (2m 42s): That's awesome. So what's land use law college like? I remember taking planning law in my master's classes for planning Nolan do and all that stuff. Yep. But I'm just curious what it's like to get to the next level.

Erin Clark (2m 54s): It's really, so I also, I started out with a master's in planning and so had that same piece in law school. You're just learning everything. It's all the same things that any lawyer is going to need. I just knew I didn't want to be in a courtroom at all. So it was much more just on the kind of contracts and statutory interpretation and those things. I didn't have a specialized land use law class, but I did take a number of real estate law courses, residential and commercial.

Also, tax law was very important in terms of how people structure their partnerships that they're going to enter into to own land and to sell land and their tax consequences. But really it was about negotiations, transactions and then, like I said, really about the statutory interpretations when we, so the same way like taking a constitutional law course really helps inform the dynamics, the tensions that we see in practicing land use in terms of what is the public good versus what are our private property rights.

And so yeah, I think kind of from a land use perspective, the most targeted specific course was just property law, understanding all of the ways that we own property, our relationship with property. And as I said, I see in my work every day that tension between what are we doing, how does this private property serve the public and also serve who owns that land. And that's just going to be a forever, just a philosophical debate that we always have.

Jeff Wood (4m 36s): So then now you're at the Denver Housing Authority.

Erin Clark (4m 39s): I am. I'll be coming up on two years at the Denver Housing Authority or DHA for short in just a few weeks here.

Jeff Wood (4m 45s): That's awesome. What brought you there?

Erin Clark (4m 47s): So as I said, I've just came to DHA two years ago and this is year six for me in affordable housing overall. But I actually love that I came to it after an established career as a planner working on the municipal side, as an attorney, representing developers and working on public finance and how to issue bonds to then help fund development of infrastructure and just working on all these different levels of private sector, public sector, how these come together to make deals happen.

And then ultimately to do that in service of public needs, which housing that is affordable to humans at whatever income level they are at at a given time, or enough housing that as our incomes change throughout our lives, going up and down as they may, that those opportunities are there.

And so yeah, I started my career as a planner working for a city, moved on to real estate law in some small law firms, did some landlord tenant work but also was very much involved in policy through all of that.

And I served on the planning board for the City of Denver for a number of years. And it was through just some conversations with folks and seeing other developments that were happening that I met someone who runs an organization called Urban Land Conservancy or ULC, which is a Denver-based nonprofit organization. It's 20 years old now and they really use real estate to kind of try to work against the market in some ways. Not anti-market but just in helping to corral real estate for community benefits.

And so that means land banking, it means helping to have properties that we can hold and then have developers come in to partner with us to build permanently affordable, be it housing, sometimes it's commercial uses. So there's below market rates that they can offer to other nonprofits so that we maintain some actual diversity of uses and users in our communities.

There are a lot of land uses that don't generate high dollar values. But if we didn't have libraries, if we didn't have schools, if we didn't have service providers or you know, people doing really interesting things like food incubators and things like that as they're trying to get going, I think that's really the spice of life. Like that's really what makes a community a complete community and really interesting. And as land prices go up and as a lot of those are the types of uses that get priced out and that we don't have anymore and then we see just a lot of the same businesses everywhere.

So that's how it was someone taking a chance on me and kind of looking at my background and saying, come work with us here. I served as the vice president of master site development there. And then through that work, after a number of years have evolved that into now leading real estate development work for the Housing Authority.

Jeff Wood (7m 47s): That's awesome. And so let's talk about one big project that you're deeply involved in. Let's talk about Sun Valley. Can you paint a picture of what the neighborhood kind of looked like maybe back in 2010, 2005 in the early aughts?

Erin Clark (8m 1s): So it's interesting, I'm a Denver native and of course I've only been at DHA for the past two years, so I can't speak to exactly what was happening 10 years ago in Sun Valley. But I can share that having grown up in Denver. And then I lived elsewhere in the country for about 16 years.

I moved back to Denver in 2013 and I took to riding my bike and I was riding along the South Platte River, which goes right through downtown Denver. People in other parts of the country would not consider this really a river. I mean it's, it's a small body of water. It's, it is not the Mississippi, it's not Chicago River, you know, we don't have boats going up and down it, but for

us in arid Colorado, in the plains here of Denver, it can be quite lovely and there's a really great path along that river.

And I was riding my bike and I looked to my right and I saw these red roofed kind of row homes, a series of maybe four or five connected units and it'd be kind of a fourplex on an angle and then there'd be another one. And I was just like, what? What is this? It's all looks the same, they're all the same color. What is this housing over here? And then I saw a sign that said Sun Valley Homes and I said, oh I think that's public housing. I've never heard of Sun Valley, I've never seen this before. It is just south of the football stadium where the Broncos play. And so I've been there a lot. I see this, this is a big iconic thing people, I had no idea that people have been living there all of this time.

And so I say that and kind of share that bit of the story in that I've heard a lot of other people who are familiar with Denver express similar feelings that some of us were really unaware of Sun Valley.

But now that I'm working with folks that have been in Sun Valley for many years, I realize the people of Sun Valley care deeply about Sun Valley. It has meant everything.

And so this is an incredible small neighborhood, about 30 acres total. It has been essentially landlocked. It is surrounded by large physical barriers. It's bounded on the east by the South Platte River and Interstate 25. And then to the north is the football stadium. And Colfax, which is, I've always been taught it's the nation's longest continuous commercial highway. And then to the west is Federal Boulevard and to the south is Sixth Avenue. Colfax Federal and Sixth are all state highways.

So these are commercial, you know, large arterial roads. And then here's Sun Valley and it has been smaller bungalow style single family homes. And then also those row homes I was speaking of before, that was 333 public housing units. Denver Housing Authority in the records that I've seen, purchased that property back in 1951. The Housing Authority goes back to 1938. So we've owned this land for a number of decades.

Generations of people grew up in these Sun Valley homes. Sun Valley as a neighborhood has been historically one of the lowest income communities in Denver and Denver being by far the largest city in the State of Colorado. That means Sun Valley was also one of the lowest income communities in the state. But what's also really interesting is it has by far been the most diverse community in the City of Denver and therefore in the State of Colorado. Today we see a lot more diversity in Aurora, which is the third largest city in Colorado and is just east of Denver.

But within Denver, Sun Valley's been really special place. It's been a place where a lot of immigrants and refugees would first settle in coming to Denver. So what I've heard is regularly over 30 different languages were spoken by the residents of Sun Valley. So there's a closeness to the neighborhood that physical separation with all those barriers created a really close knit community of folks 'cause they're not connected to a grid outside of this neighborhood.

So like a lot of the rest of us, I grew up on the east side of Denver, I didn't know to come into Sun Valley and vice versa. A lot of folks weren't venturing far outside of Sun Valley apart from going to work and, and other places. 'cause there's not a lot of employment right here. It really

is a residential neighborhood. But there's also a number of really interesting services, early childhood education and an organization called Sun Valley Kitchen. You can buy food, it's like a small restaurant. There's a lot of community meetings there. So it's just a lot of kind of those organic gathering spaces within Sun Valley that have been there for a really long time as well.

Jeff Wood (13m 1s): So then fast forward to now there's redevelopment happening, there's been a plan in place for a while. What sparked that plan initially folks are so, you know, pulled into and connected to the place. What sparked thinking about, maybe we can do something a little different here?

Erin Clark (13m 15s): So there are a few things, and this is where kind of the formal planning piece comes in, but very much involving a lot of community engagement. So a lot of it is sparked by transit actually. So it starts with Denver having a number of years ago, well the region having invested more heavily in regional and commuter transit, light rail lines, bus lines. Obviously, we're a western state, western city. We have built really broadly and sprawling and have been trying to kind of retrofit that and not be entirely car dependent.

So I speak to that because part of the light rail planning involved the West Line light Rail to connect downtown Denver out to Golden, the town of Golden, west of Denver and along that line are now a number of station area plans were created. So the city and the regional transportation district worked together to create area plans around transit nodes. So one big planning effort that has now sparked redevelopment of Sun Valley is the Decatur Federal Station area plan.

So that was looking at this whole area as a transit-oriented development and anticipating higher density to come to this area in the future. Following on that station area plan was also a general development plan. So that is kind of a neighborhood scale plan. Again focusing on increasing density, increasing connectivity, open space. We have this river next to us but otherwise it's, everything is concrete and so how to have more green space brought into this area as well.

And so the Housing Authority actually was a part of those efforts and then built upon that to apply for a highly competitive grant from HUD, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, that we won. And so in 2014 we got a planning grant from HUD through its Choice Neighborhood program. And then in 2016 we were able to successfully get a HUD Choice Neighborhood implementation grant.

So that's \$30 million from HUD to make Sun Valley a HUD Choice Neighborhood. And the Choice Neighborhoods program is part of a long history across housing authorities. Again, we've been here since 1938. I believe the federal law for housing authorities dates to 1937.

We're all shifting though now from just public subsidy in housing and building those traditional projects that we've all known about, giant high rises or row homes. What really as we look back at it now was concentrating poverty, was warehousing human beings, rather than really looking at overall context and quality of life and a mix of uses and a mix of incomes.

The Choice Neighborhood program through HUD is intended to do just that, to deconcentrate poverty, to provide for a mix of incomes and to really look across a neighborhood and say how

can we redevelop this in a really thoughtful way? Not only having, so we have a mix of building types, a mix of uses residential, commercial community serving uses.

And so with that we built a redevelopment plan, a transformation plan that aligns with that earlier Decatur Federal stationary plan and also that general development plan.

So the Sun Valley transformation plan is what DHA has now been building to since we got that grant in 2016. So the overall redevelopment has us going from those original 333 public housing units on Kline streets, that roads to nowhere essentially and kind of made even more insular the public housing within the broader insularity of Sun Valley as a neighborhood. And we're going from those 333 units to over 950 new apartments that we are responsible for building.

It's seven buildings, six of them are formerly a part of the, the HUD grant and we've added a seventh building. And then we also have other land that we're selling to market rate developers. So we have a mix of incomes in our buildings but then also there'd be greater diversity of income served in this neighborhood because there are some other parties that are going to be building on some of our land as well. So when all is said and done, DHA will have leveraged our dollars and our land to result in over 2000 new housing units in this area.

Jeff Wood (18m 4s): A lot of housing. Yeah, especially considering there was only 333 before. Yeah. Well then how was the community involved? Like what did they ask for during the process?

Erin Clark (18m 14s): So a part of this has been, yes we're increasing density, but we really took a holistic look at community needs. So we're also building a park, so we're building all these housing units but we talked about a lack of open space. So we are looking to get a contractor on board now and start building next year, the first phase of two to build an 11 acre riverfront park. So that is also on land that's owned by DHA but that is not where we're building housing. We're building this park that will be a regional park.

The first half is kind of the more contemplative area and then the north half will be a little more active. But that has been a labor of love and an ongoing intentional work with Sun Valley residents and stakeholders over a number of years. So it'd be a civic plaza, you know, dog parks, just areas to walk a lot of color really thinking about all of the different cultures that have been represented in Sun Valley and how to have that reflected in this park and have it be a place that is welcoming to all and while it is along a regional trail.

And so we anticipate folks from outside of Sun Valley also using this park. Our focus is how can this be a benefit to the residents of Sun Valley, those who have always called Sun Valley home and have been temporarily relocated and are invited to move back now that we have the new buildings up and then also all the new people that will be living there as well because as we noted there's going to be a lot more housing than there was previously. The redevelopment plan itself was very much working with community.

We've had, we created a number of meetings and community groups for to provide feedback to put together the plan to come up with healthy living goals that are kind of the north star for the development. So focusing on food access, open space, family and connectivity on the food access piece. That was very critical to the residents of Sun Valley. Again, building on that theme

of a level of disconnection, physical disconnection of this neighborhood, Sun Valley, it's surrounded by major thoroughfares but it doesn't have any right through it.

And so that's not where a large format grocery store would come. And also we know that large format grocery stores look at demographics, they look at number of housing units and they look at the income levels of the people in the housing. This drives me endlessly crazy because we all need food and we will all pay for food and to not be able to have fresh food in this neighborhood or anywhere close was really a problem.

The closest any food access is a block up the street at a seven 11 and a gas station. There's a safe way grocery store that's like a Kroger or you know that is about two miles north. We also have a number of residents in Sun Valley who do not have their own vehicles. So they would be walking up a hill to get to a big road to ride a bus a mile and a half, two miles to go to the store and then haul everything back. So in order to address that, we conceived of and built Decatur Fresh Market.

So in the first phase of new development that DHA has overseen and that's two buildings called the Gateways Gateway North and Gateway South on the ground floor of Gateway South is the Decatur Fresh Market. So it's a small format store but it is so heartwarming every time I go in there it just makes me so happy. Everybody knows the manager Rick, he's amazing. He is so smiley and wonderful and cares so much and there are Sun Valley residents who work there and they actually ask Sun Valley residents what they want and need to have in the store.

So you know, there's a lot of people coming from all over the world who have different food cultures and things that they would stock regularly and they would often have to travel to Aurora to somewhere farther east on buses, you know, to go to a specialty African store or an Asian market or what have you. And so there's some of those kind of core things that they may be cooking with that we're able to stock at the Decatur Fresh Market. There's a small coffee shop there, high quality coffee for like a buck or two so definitely is better than what you'd get anywhere else.

And then we also have fresh produce there. We also built through the redevelopment of Grow Garden. So there are a few community gardens in Sun Valley and one of them is a larger new one that we helped to build and we've partnered DHA has partnered with Denver Botanic Gardens to oversee that garden. And so we're able to harvest from the local garden, have a farmer's market, you know, in the neighborhood and also source some of the produce get that gets sold at the Decatur Fresh Market from the local garden.

Jeff Wood (23m 17s): That's awesome. It sounds like a lot of infusion of health principles and kind of the social determinants of health overall thinking about what the neighborhood was before and how it was cut off and then connecting it to these services and food and everything that's needed to create thriving community.

Erin Clark (23m 33s): That's exactly right. And it's actually interesting the river alone, just kind of zooming out to Denver more broadly. We have had the South Platte River again, I grew up in Denver. I didn't really realize it was there. We turned our backs to it for so long. It was where the freight rail lines would run right? And industry and warehouses were along the river. It's

only in more recent years that we're finally turning around, turning to face it, making it our front door instead of our back door and recognizing it, embracing the river as an amenity.

And so I think it's really interesting and exciting that Sun Valley gets to be a part of that renaissance for downtown Denver because right on the other side of the river is downtown Denver is Union Station, which in the past decade had a major historical renovation and a whole lot of new development there. Like our downtown is intended to expand by many acres in the coming 20 plus years. 'cause we have basketball hockey arena that has a bunch of surface parking that's going to be redeveloped.

We have an amusement park that's downtown and that's set to be redeveloped. All of these things are going to bring more housing. Sun Valley is also redeveloping in somewhat of a similar way but with the priority on a community that was already there and on affordable housing. So the 950 plus units that DHA is building in Sun Valley, around 60 to 80% of them of all of the units that we're building are income restricted units.

So they are, you know, forever affordable housing. DHA continues to own the land. So we are maintaining that affordability in perpetuity. And then we have some level of unrestricted units there as well with the intention to have people have options, right? Like you love this neighborhood but you shouldn't have to be locked into, you can live here as long as your income stays exactly in this small band for compliance purposes of affordable housing.

And if you, you know, get a different job if your income goes up, if your family composition changes, you'd have to leave. We want people to have options to move around within the same neighborhood and still maintain your ties, you know, to your kids' friends and to childcare and, and all of the things that that you would be used to having in and near the community that you know. And so I think that's a really exciting thing. And so we as DHA are keeping a close eye on some of the other big developments that will also be along the South Platte River and trying to weigh in on what affordable housing can look like there.

It will be different, the mix will be, you know, 60 to 80% unrestricted and 20 to 40% income restricted housing. And so that's feeling also like it, it's going to end up being somewhat of a social experiment and seeing kind of when we have predominantly affordable housing with some unrestricted and vice versa and you know, we just want to make sure that however these things are done, it's done in a thoughtful way that people are thinking about the end result and how this is going to feel as a community.

And not only this is what we're doing because this is how the financing works to build these buildings. That is critical obviously. Like we can't dismiss how we fund new development because if we can't find those financing sources then the buildings don't exist and we have to build more housing. We are hundreds of thousands of units behind where we need to be. So just in basic demand supply that's affecting prices.

But when we stop there and we just pull together funding sources to close on financing and build a building, I think we can often miss some of you know, what's really important about the lived experience in the buildings that we've built. And so I'm hoping that that will remain central to the conversations for all of this other redevelopment that we're going to see.

Jeff Wood (27m 51s): Yeah and it's really interesting because you know, before when you look at the rail lines and the projects and the fast track system overall, you see, you know, one line goes directly into downtown Denver and then one line kind of skirts the edge and goes around towards Union Station. But the interesting part about this project and then also the other ones that you mentioned, Elitch Gardens and the redevelopment of the parking lots you're talking about there and then also the Denver, the stadium parking lots as well that's, that's near Bronco Stadium. If you kind of pull these stations together into like a string of pearls, you're giving people access to all these new opportunities when you have those major redevelopment projects finished.

And so it might be longer than people wanted from fast tracks, you know, connecting people with places. But it really ties in these neighborhoods together, which is a really fascinating outcome of this project. But also the potential connections between the other two in Union Station because you're bringing three massive redevelopment projects. I mean 3000 units is a lot, but then you get another 3000 units, another 3000 units, you get into 10,000 maybe 15,000 units in the future. That's a real big connection for the communities that exist in Sun Valley to connect with these other communities that are going to be popping up as well as well as downtown and other job opportunities and things like that. So it really is this amazing thing that's been planned forever, hopefully coming to fruition.

Erin Clark (29m 9s): Absolutely. I mean it really is all happening. You know, a lot of us, we hear these plans and actually just heard a colleague today who's not in the weeds of all the planning things that that others, sorry. And he's like, and he was like, oh but the amusement park is still there and I keep hearing it's going away and like that's completely fair. We keep hearing that it's going to be redeveloped, but we're still going, you know, if the park is still there, people still go in the summers, it's not leaving right now, but the plans are being worked on and the zoning being put in place and all of these different things so that when they are ready it will be an opportunity to, again it's extending downtown.

There's Spear Boulevard is a large road that divides where the central business district is and then these areas right next to the river, the idea is that downtown will be extending to the across sphere and to these areas. And then we at Sun Valley are on the other side of the river from those areas. And so how can we, you know, in the future have some additional connections across the river as well to help knit all of this together.

It's an opportunity to stitch some things back that were historically intentionally segregated land use wise as happened in every city in the US when we created our interstate highway system and all these types of things, right? That this is Sun Valley represents being on the wrong side of the tracks, right the the wrong side of the highway and and being kind of separated from the core of where the offices were, where the restaurants were and we were just kind of home to warehouses and, and things that people were not looking at as as desirable, but we're we're changing that.

Jeff Wood (31m 4s): I'm also curious what elements of the project kind of stand out as a, as a model, as something that maybe can be replicated in other places or can it be replicated in other places?

Erin Clark (31m 14s): I think there's so much that should be replicated, but some of it's physical things but a lot of it is just the intentionality, the focus on community and looking at context and kind of how we develop. But kind of the tangible things are just really high quality housing. As we said, anyone who's working in affordable housing, we are not in the business of concentrating poverty. We are in the business of building great homes for people that they can actually afford.

I think affordable housing is really interesting term. You know, we'll hear some people try to say attainable housing as well and so they'll look at affordable housing as housing with government subsidies to make it affordable and attainable. Housing is housing that we're building, that's market rate housing that's not subsidized but maybe it's smaller units or what have you. And, and we're bringing the price down either way, whether it's attainable, whether it's affordable, everything is affordable to someone. It just depends on what your income level is. And so we want to make sure that, as you said, we're thinking about all the different options and that there's a life cycle, there's a continuum of housing opportunities in an area with a lot of new housing.

We really listened a lot to the former residents of the Sun Valley homes. What would they like to see? What did they like about the homes that they had and what did they want to see improved? Something that was great actually for the original Sun Valley homes is that people had a front door and a back door. These were row homes so they were walking out to grass and so now we're building, you know, six to 12 story buildings. Not everyone's going to be able to just walk outside and see their neighbors.

So even up high we try to incorporate, there's some skywalks open air. Even when you live on the seventh floor of a building, you have an opportunity to get some fresh air outside of your own unit. We have rooftop amenity decks, we have one building that has an amenity deck on the third floor. It's accessible from a lot of different parts of the building. You don't have to only enter from this shared community room, you can get there from the fourth floor and come down this building.

It's called Thrive. And it was also Shop Works is the architect of that building and they're a local architecture firm that does a lot of research and implementation of trauma informed design. It's most notable in the Thrive Apartments, but it is absolutely a part of everything that DHA is overseeing being built in Sun Valley because that's the families that we're working with. A lot of them have experienced levels of trauma and we want to make sure that we're building spaces that feel safe, that do not feel like a warehouse, that do not feel like there are lost spaces or forgotten spaces that no one cares about.

So for example, one of my favorite things in the Thrive Apartments is just that the major stairwell has glass has windows all the way up. So it's not just concrete that is, you know, this is a UA utilitarian space where you just use it to go up and down. It's actually really beautiful. The stairs kind of go at an angle and so you feel engaged and it's a wide open space. You feel air, you can see where someone else might be. 'cause you can imagine how it can actually be stressful to be in a stairwell and hear the footsteps of someone else above you or below you but not know exactly where they are or who they are that you're guessing.

So it's just those types of details. We have long hallways but they're never straight. They're a little bit jagged and they make sure to include sunlight coming in midway through. There's seating areas along the way and just a lot of those types of things to really help folks feel a sense of community within each building. And then also that all the buildings together create a sense of community. Other things that we learned from the Sun Valley homes residents was just, there's a lot of multi-generational families and so they wanted to have spaces that felt comfortable to all be together, but also where you know, the young kids could be apart from the grandparents, that type of thing.

And also as we noted earlier, so many folks coming from other parts of the world that have really strong food cultures and family gathering. And so all of the new housing really focus so much on kitchens and common areas and making sure that there's a lot of counter space, a lot more storage space in the kitchens cabinet areas, but then also these laundry rooms in these buildings. Well that's another thing we made sure to have in-unit laundry facilities. Everyone has a stack of a washer dryer and a lot of the laundry rooms in these apartments are rooms like they're large areas that also could serve as a pantry or other space for storage.

And so it's those types of things that were really missing from the public housing that we had before and that have been incorporated into the new housing. And it's important to note that this redevelopment, I think what's really critical and what we hope is a model for the large redevelopments along the South Platte River that we talked about before are that we can invest in neighborhoods and we can bring new investment to areas. Obviously we'll just be replacing surface parking lots for some of these areas and not existing homes, but that does not have to mean displacement.

So it's like we can invest, we can replace the housing stock without replacing the sense of neighborhood, the sense of community. How do we capture that and build on it. That's what we really sought to do in Sun Valley.

Jeff Wood (37m 14s): I mean I wanted to ask you too about how you, you kept residents, right? Like what was the process like for keeping residents?

Erin Clark (37m 20s): Yeah, so all of the households that were in the original Sun Valley homes have a legal right to return. They have the first right on the new housing that's built. So that was a major community effort as well is that we're doing this redevelopment that is going to mean we are relocating people from their homes right over time. And we demolished those original public housing units in phases over a few years. So the last of those came down around May of 2022.

We had opened the first phase of new housing in 2021. So all of the denverhousing Authority residents that lived there before, we helped them relocate to other DHA owned properties. And then as the new units come back online, we've maintained relationships, communication with those former residents, made sure to keep them engaged in the redevelopment process and knowing what's happening. And so again, they're the ones who get first pick basically to return to Sun Valley.

We anecdotally have heard that across the country you can expect maybe between five and 10% of residents to return to properties. Our numbers, I don't know exactly what they are at this point, but they're definitely well above that by many multiples. And that's been really exciting for us. We wanted to be over 50% have people returning to Sun Valley.

Jeff Wood (38m 54s): I think it's interesting when they come back that the sense of community that they built before stays and ultimately that's a really tough thing to pull off because even if it's 50%, there's 50% of folks that aren't returning as well. And if it's 10% in other places, that kind of makes it so that you're basically, you know, replacing the folks that were there with new folks and yeah, they have different experiences and different connections and they don't have that ability to kind of call back to maybe like a five year period ago where they met the neighbor across the hall and decided they were going to go over for game night or something like that, whatever it was.

I'm wondering how that community gets kept, especially when people have to leave and then come back and you know, try to reform some of those bonds.

Erin Clark (39m 36s): I think that is really critical and it's completely fair and we can't pretend that everything will come back exactly as it was before. In all of the seven buildings that DHA is built, all 333 of those original town homes have been replaced on a one for one basis. So where people had a five bedroom unit before we've built five bedroom units into the new buildings. But with that being said, life is messy. Life changes. So there could be a family that was in a five bedroom before, now they've been living somewhere else for a few years.

That's not to say that they're a five person family now people have more kids or their kids were older and they've moved out or you know, people have gotten married, people have gotten divorced, like families change, household composition changes. And so that's been really interesting as well to try to see what has changed in the Interim. Do they want to come back? How are they coming back? What is the type of housing that suits them now you know, what we really love in a lot of these communities that we redevelop as a housing Authority is when multiple members of a family will live in different units and different buildings, you know, within a few blocks of each other.

So that's a form of connection that's really exciting and great to hold onto. But absolutely our goal is to have built on what made, what has historically made Sun Valley unique. It is that international flavor. It is that you know, people really relying on each other, being able to access one another, feeling safe to walk around and get to know each other's families, each other's kids. But making room for more people.

But we think if we're intentional about this is what Sun Valley's about that the new people coming will be excited to join that and add to it versus just coming in and changing it. You know, just whole cloth being like I'm showing up with whatever I came with and it's totally different and I don't care what happened here before. There's so many people who just care so much about what Sun Valley was and is and will continue to be. What we are trying to do is foster those spaces where those organic relationships can continue and can grow.

And so, you know, that is the park that is community spaces within buildings that is playground areas. We actually have play structures within some of the new buildings that were selected by the kids of Sun Valley. Like they voted, they actually went to a little ballot and decided if they wanted a fox or a dinosaur and they picked this fox and we had that custom made and brought in. So it's local art, it's the fact that children of the neighborhood are the ones who have designed the unit numbers.

Like every apartment has art from a child that is the background for you know, unit 2 0 2 or whatever you have there. So some of it is just trying to kind of keep a lot of those more personalized elements there and people feeling that they've actually tangibly contributed to these new buildings so that there's more of a level of buy-in and support and excitement about what's new because redevelopment means change.

Change is scary. That is true for all human beings. It's like change leads to fear. It's like, wait, am I going to like this? I can't picture it. What is that going to be? How's that going to feel different? It takes us out of our comfort zones. And so we've tried to work with individuals to be along with us in the process and the more that their voices are not just heard in a meeting but that it's showing up in what they physically see there.

We can't just make promises or talk about what we think people might want to see there. We have to go back to them and say okay, this is what we heard, this is how it's showing up. And then say does this feel responsive? We have to keep the conversation going.

Jeff Wood (43m 59s): There's been so many good things about the project. I'm wondering if there's anything that you'd do differently if you had another opportunity.

Erin Clark (44m 5s): Well there's a ton. Yeah, I mean that's everything in life. Everything in development is iterative, you know, and there's choices, decisions you make at a given time given what you know and the constraints you have then that you probably do differently going forward. You know, some things are just different from the first two buildings to the last three that are under construction now. I think we can always communicate even more with folks. We also, I mean just physically we've seen that as wonderful in ideas.

It's been to have open areas in these new buildings to harken back to the front door and back doors that people had in the original Sun Valley homes units. It's been a a maintenance challenge which like that's where we get snow sometimes. So there's the idea of fostering community and then it's like, well it's not actually getting people out and able to play and and spend time with one another. And, and so we try to really look at those types of things and how can we have even better spaces going forward.

I think one thing that's unfortunate but it's just a reality is that we've had to build all the buildings before the park. It would be ideal to have at least a portion of the park already open instead of building housing and rerouting roads and promising this open space to come. 'cause parks are, you know, for planning geeks. So like we're, it's right, it's the lungs of this, it's the place you get to breathe.

So the, that's very unfortunate reality of all of this is that we're building this beautiful new housing and people live there and that's great but it's also still a construction site. As I said,

we've been creating brand new roads where there weren't any because they didn't connect before. And so we've reintroduced a street grid and that meant not just new streets and sidewalks but all of the storm water, you know, water lines, electrical lines that run underneath it. Everything had to be rerouted and redone and so that's a lot of work.

So yeah, so that's, again, this is just the order that things had had to come in for a lot of different reasons but really wish, wish we could have changed that and have more of those community spaces coming sooner. But the great thing is having that decaat freshs market that has been a really amazing community gathering space while all of the other kind of upheaval of construction has been happening.

Jeff Wood (46m 41s): I've got two more questions for you. There's been a lot of talk at the Colorado legislature about tying together expanded transit funding and prodding cities to improve the housing shortage. Is there something the state could do to facilitate more of these types of projects like Sun Valley through that process?

Erin Clark (46m 56s): I think absolutely. I'm actually a really strong proponent of more thinking about land use and housing and these types of needs as matters of statewide concern and that require that higher order thinking, regional cooperation and really tying these things together. Housing is core to how we organize ourselves as individuals and as a society. And it's necessarily tied to so many other things.

Where can the housing go that is approximate to where educational opportunities are, where jobs opportunities are, where I'm getting my food, where I can access healthcare. Like this is all important and it can't be determined solely on a city by city or county by county basis. 'cause those are just random political lines that we drew on a map. But that's not how individuals live their lives.

And we see so much more frequently now people's housing decisions driven by really just by affordability and they're having to move farther and farther out and not even necessarily the where they want to be or where it makes sense for where other parts of their lives are. But this is what makes sense that I can actually afford. And I think the more that we look at housing as core to everything else I've also taken to my mantra in the last few years has been that everyone's in the housing business.

If you were working in education before, you care now about housing, if you are trying to deal with healthcare, you have to help us solve housing. Because as you know, you use that term earlier in this podcast, the social determinants of health. Like if we do not have stable housing options, people can't go to school consistently, they can't learn when they're there, they can't get food, they're going to be more stressed, their health outcomes are going to go down. All of these things are interconnected and we have to plan for them that way.

So when you speak specifically about housing and transportation and transit, I think those absolutely have to go together. Actually was recently just last week part of a regional transportation committee. So it's the Denver metropolitan region and they are conducting a regional housing assessment, which is great to know that a group that's focused on regional planning and specifically on transportation funding is digging into housing themselves.

But specifically when we talk about what makes housing affordable, we are really locked into here's how much you pay in rent or here's how much you pay for your mortgage. The more data that we can understand about the housing piece, the housing cost on its own, and marry it with the other daily cost of life. And a big part of that is your transportation. So are we only providing housing options in places where people have to drive a car? So now what is the cost of owning that car and of the insurance and what have you and how many miles do you have to travel versus is there a transit option?

Right now in a western city like Denver and I used to live in LA it was very much this way where sure there's a subway, there's some light rail, but it's only good for point A to point B. You can't add any CSDs or anything else in there. And that's very much how we are here. It's just like maybe you can go from home to work, but you can't make a stop to go to some store or to pick up your kid at dance class or anything like that. If we could factor in those costs, I think we'd make some different decisions about where we cite housing and the level of density that we put there.

Here in the city of Denver, like there are policies that promote higher density housing along transit lines, but a lot of times the transit's not in useful places yet. Or we are building higher density housing, kind of hoping for the transit to come later. What if we actually planned all these things together? Wow, amazing. And so going back

Jeff Wood (51m 15s): To planning school.

Erin Clark (51m 16s): Yeah, exactly. But I think that it really does have to come from regional organizations and from the state to help provide the data to help individual cities make those decisions in context. 'cause otherwise we're all making them, you know, one parcel at a time within my one jurisdiction and it has all these other impacts on neighboring cities, on neighboring communities, on the whole ecosystem of housing and Mobility.

Jeff Wood (51m 48s): I think we're going to see more discussions about the housing theory of everything coming up in the next decade. Just because how it's connected to everything, like you said. I mean all the things you mentioned we've talked about on the show many times, but just pulling those things together and getting out of our silos is really hard. But you're right, I mean, regional and state thinking are really important and that's kind of the impetus for the question. But sometimes it's a, it's a little messy politically because of how people feel about home and change. And you mentioned change being hard for everybody earlier and I think that's one of the things. My last one is where are you at now with the project? When is it finishing and what are you hoping to see over the next few years?

Erin Clark (52m 26s): So Sun Valley's about to hit a really important milestone. The last three of the seven buildings that DHA has self-developed are under construction now. So in 2025, just a few months apart, we'll be opening these three buildings and delivering 514 new housing units into the market in just a two block area. So we are working hard right now to prepare for that, knowing that that's a lot of units to bring online at once.

And we want to make sure that that lease up is successful and that a lot of new households new and returning households will be able to call that home. In particular, the last of those

buildings will be a 12 story high rise that's a hundred percent affordable and it's for seniors and non elderly disabled residents. And so that one, all of the others are really intended to serve families and as we said, have, you know, a mix of income levels there, that last building Flo will be different.

And we're excited to be able to provide senior housing specifically. And then also in 2025 we'll be constructing the first five acres of the riverfront park. And so these final three buildings are directly across the street from that park. And so that's going to be really exciting as well. And it's a park that DHA is overseeing the construction of, but ultimately it will be a city park. We will be dedicating that back to the city to, to own and maintain going forward. And then we just have a lot of other opportunities.

We're under contract on the vacant land that we own that we're looking to sell to market rate developers. So that is a total of, it's another thousand units on those three parcels. And so we'll be facilitating closing on those deals and seeing those be built as well. Finally being done with all the infrastructure that we're building, we're doing some environmental remediation work in Sun Valley. There used to be an Excel tank farm with these giant oil tanks there three of those.

We had those successfully demolished last year and so still have to figure out what the future of that land's going to be. But a large portion of that will be the final phase of the park. But ultimately just, yeah, seeing people moving in, seeing how this all lives and feels as a community and how we can just continue to help foster the connectivity between Sun Valley residents and introducing Sun Valley to other people who were like me years ago where I didn't know what this place was.

And now it's just, it's a really a jewel of the city and we want to see everybody get excited about it the way we are. Yeah.

Jeff Wood (55m 15s): Well there's so much more we could probably talk about, but where can folks find out more about the project if they want to?

Erin Clark (55m 21s): So we are actively updating the housing website and having improved property information there. So certainly people can go to denverhousing.org to see all of the different work we're doing. And then we also created some standalone websites for some of the newer buildings. So one of those is [thrive Denver living.com](https://thrive.denverliving.com) and then another building is called Greenhouse, G-R-E-E-N-H-A-U-S.

And there's a website, [greenhouse Denver living.com](https://greenhouse.denverliving.com). So that is for two of the apartment buildings. It has a lot of great photos and 3D walkthroughs of the units, that type of thing. And we also have a map on the DHA website where we show just all of the redevelopment that we're doing, all the different buildings and what that looks like. So yeah, but we're trying to get more content up all the time.

Jeff Wood (56m 17s): Well, I look forward to visiting someday.

Erin Clark (56m 20s): Please, please do.

Jeff Wood (56m 21s): Well, Erin, thanks for joining us. We really appreciate your time.

Erin Clark (56m 27s): Thank you so much. This was fun.

Grace Crunican (56m 44s): Thanks for listening. Find out more about our work by visiting our website, mpactmobility.org. That's M as in Mobility and Pact as in agreement mpactmobility.org. Thank you.