# **Urban Renewal in Harrisonburg**

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#### **What Happened in Harrisonburg Happened Around the Country**

More than 1,200 municipalities participated in the program.

- Cleared 156 sq miles.
- Destroyed 450,000 dwelling units
- Displaced 114,000 businesses
- Displaced 1.3M people
  - Majority non-white, tenants.
  - Disproportionately poor and elderly.

### Why was Urban Renewal Attractive to Cities like Harrisonburg?

#### **Federal Grant and Loan Program**

- Housing Act of 1949
  - Focused on improvements to affordable housing
- Housing Act of 1954
  - Emphasized private investment
- Paid for most (¾ or ¾) of the cost of redevelopment

#### **Urban Renewal in Harrisonburg**

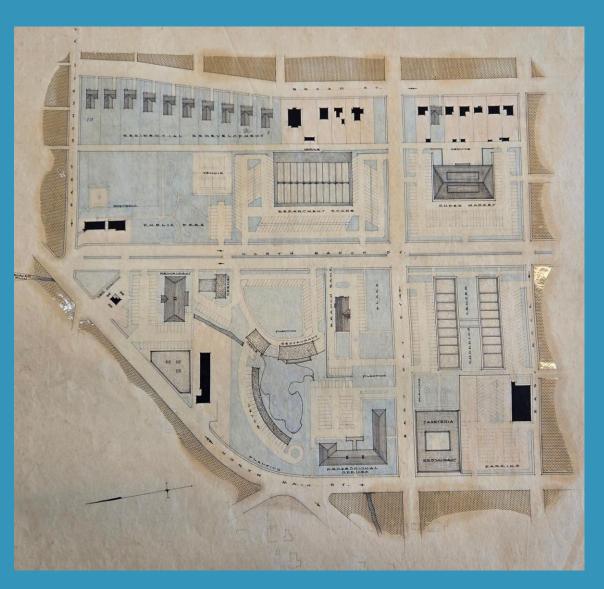
### Two projects, Northeast (R4) and Wolfe St (R16)

### Adjacent land, similar goals:

- Create more parking spots.
- Widen Mason St.
- Expand Harrisonburg's commercial district.
- Eliminate "substandard" housing.



The goal was to turn a predominantly Black residential neighborhood ...



... into a White commercial district.

# What did the City Do?

### Demolished 181 buildings to clear roughly 40 acres:

- 225 dwelling units
- 23 businesses
- 2 churches

### Displaced 215 households (710 people)

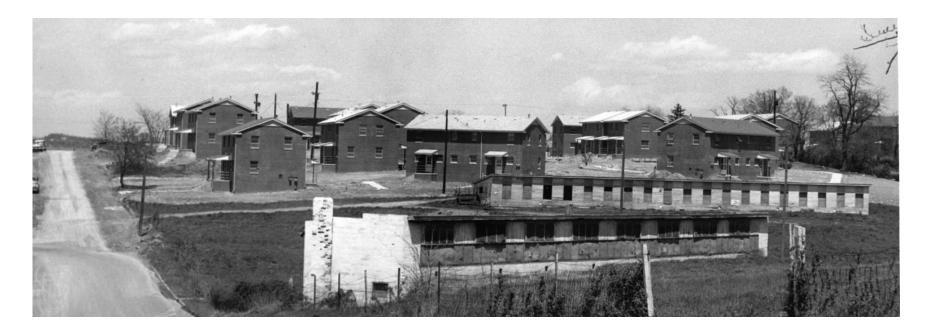
- Most were African American
- Most were tenants

#### Where Did the Former Residents Go?

Using city directories, we were able to track some but not all displacees

#### Many moved into new public housing:

- The first 10 tenants moved in Oct. 1960.
- At least 52 (probably more) of 1st generation of public housing occupants were renewal area displacees.
- Few alternative housing options open to Black displacees.



## **How Did Urban Renewal Help Harrisonburg?**

- Urban renewal sparked a commercial expansion:
  - Downtown investment boomed in the immediate aftermath of urban renewal.
    - Sales of renewal land paid City's redevelopment costs.
  - Tax revenues rose.

- Urban renewal caused construction of public housing:
  - Improved housing conditions for some displacees.
    - Among the owners of renewal area rental property was one of the city's most notorious slumlords.

### The Immediate Aftermath of Urban Renewal



### **How Did Urban Renewal Hurt Harrisonburg?**

Homes and community were sacrificed to a temporary commercial boom.

 African American population bore a disproportionate share of this loss.

#### **Unanswered Questions**

#### **Lack of surviving documentation means:**

- We cannot identify all of the people displaced by urban renewal. (Nor do we know where some of them moved.)
- We cannot assess whether individual owners were financially harmed by seizure of their property.
- We do not know whether relocation translated into higher housing or transportation costs for tenants.
- Did urban renewal play a role in the decline of Harrisonburg's Black population between 1960 and 1970?

### **Key Recommendations**

 A thorough search of HRHA document holdings to determine whether additional urban renewal or public housing documentation still exists.

Community outreach focused on filling in the blanks.