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# Empty PHA highrise, historic cemetery at center of Germantown dispute

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## Abstract (summary)

[...]there are answers, PHA cannot proceed. Since it receives federal funds, the agency must abide by federal laws regarding historic preservation.

## Full Text

March 19--Behind a chain-link fence in the 300 block of West Queen Lane in Germantown, a shuttered, 16-story public housing high-rise looms over an empty block and barren playground.

The Queen Lane apartment building has been locked up since 2011. It was supposed to have been demolished and replaced with rowhouses by the Philadelphia Housing Authority.

But the $27 million project is stalled as PHA remains locked in a standoff with neighbors.

This block is not just any block. It's the site of a potter's field for "Strangers, Negroes and Mulattoes," some of whom were buried there as far back as 1775.

Before the project can move forward, PHA has to complete an archaeological survey to get a more precise reading of the boundaries of the burial ground.

Archaeologists call it "ground truthing." Using sophisticated radar and simple shovels, they are sifting for bones to determine where the "Strangers Burying Ground" begins and ends.

Until there are answers, PHA cannot proceed. Since it receives federal funds, the agency must abide by federal laws regarding historic preservation.

Once the ground-truthing report is delivered, in late April, HUD will have to decide if further analysis is required.

Some neighbors view the land as "sacred."

"We're not against them building," said Lisa Hopkins, cofounder of Northwest Neighbors of Germantown, a community group organized around the Queen Lane controversy. "We're against the continued desecration of the ground."

The authority has pledged not to build on an area in the center of the block where it believes the burial ground was located. PHA changed its design to keep that as open green space. It also will place a plaque to commemorate the history of the site -- something ignored when the high-rise was built in 1955.

But while acknowledging the past, PHA's new president, Kelvin Jeremiah, said the agency was "unwavering" in its intention to build more public housing on the land.

If there are further delays, he added, PHA is prepared to gut and renovate the existing building.

"It's a very real possibility," Jeremiah said. "At some point we have to say, enough is enough."

PHA has spent $125,000 for the archaeological survey and should have a report in April.

Douglas Mooney, president of the Philadelphia Archaeological Forum, said the Queen Lane site was historically important: "With the exception of the potter's field at Washington Square, it may be the oldest African American cemetery in Philadelphia."

The burial ground was being used as late as 1921, at which point it was converted into a playground, Mooney said. PHA bought half the block for the Queen Lane Apartments. Mooney said there was little information on what happened to the graves during construction.

"It's possible there could be human remains that were previously disturbed and spread all over this place," Mooney said.

The standoff at Queen Lane, however, is not just about historic preservation. Entangled in the controversy also are matters of economics.

Some homeowners object to PHA's plan to have all 55 units reserved as rentals for low-income families. They argue that it would be better for the vibrancy of the surrounding community if some of the units were sold to homeowners, creating a broader income mix.

"The community was blamed for not wanting any public housing tenants in that neighborhood," said Yvonne Haskins, founder of the Germantown United Community Development Corp. "What people have objected to is the concentration of poor people on one block."

PHA has said that federal funding that the agency used for building mixed-income developments has dried up. The agency also is facing a $42 million shortfall at a time when it has 140,000 people on the waiting list for public housing or rent subsidies.

At Queen Lane, the current design calls for low-rise housing along only the outer perimeter of Pulaski Avenue, Priscilla and West Penn Streets, and parts of Queen Lane. The open space would take up most of the center of the block, but there is no plan to replace the Wissahickon playground -- another criticism of neighbors.

City Councilwoman Cindy Bass, whose district includes the community, supports the project. "What they are going to build is going to be fantastic in terms of the look of the community," Bass said. The old tower is an eyesore, she added.

PHA's plan for memorializing the potter's field, Bass added, will go a long way to "right some wrongs."

"Let's be honest," she said. "Before, they dug folks up and there was no thought about the land and what was there."

"This is a way to repair what was done."

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