

Mayor Taps Olatoye to Run Troubled HA, Will Retain House As Its GM

By DAVID SIMS | Posted: Friday, February 14, 2014 5:00 pm

Mayor de Blasio looked to the private sector in naming three new housing-agency heads Feb. 8, but will keep Cecil House as the General Manager at the Housing Authority despite its overwhelming problems in the final term of the Bloomberg administration.

Teamsters Local 237 President Gregory Floyd said he was relieved to see Mr. House staying on, blaming any past problems at the agency on embattled former HA Chairman John B. Rhea.

Olatoye New HA Chair

Mr. House, who was appointed in 2012, will be overseen by new HA Chairwoman Shola Olatoye, who was vice president of non-profit Enterprise Community Partners, where she worked to build and preserve affordable housing in New York.

While Mr. de Blasio had harshly criticized Mr. Rhea on the campaign trail for backlogs in work orders and unspent Federal funds, he said Mr. House had done well to address public housing's chronic problems in the last 18 months.

"I made no secret of my disagreements with the previous chair of NYCHA...a lot has to change in the approach," he said. "But despite problems I saw...I saw a bright point in what the General Manager had been doing over the last year and a half."

Mr. de Blasio said he was "struck" by Mr. House's ability to cut through bureaucracy at the agency. "Under Cecil, average wait times for basic maintenance have shrunk from a staggering and unacceptable 134 days to just 10 days."

The wait for skilled repairs dropped from 249 days to 48 days in the same period, he noted.

'Uphill Battle'

"It was a very low bar that the incoming chairperson had to meet," Mr. Floyd, who represents most HA employees, said in a phone interview. "That being said, the new chairwoman will be facing a tremendous uphill battle. However, having Cecil House re-appointed as General Manager will be a tremendous help to her.

"He already has a handle on the problems that NYCHA's facing," he continued. "Hopefully he'll now have a chairperson who understands the magnitude and complexity of the problems, and the willingness to work with partners."

The union leader laid the blame for the HA's recent woes at Mr. Rhea's feet. "I think Cecil House's ability to really perform was hampered by John Rhea," he said. Mr. Floyd had slammed the former chair for his efforts to convert unused HA space for private housing, and his unwillingness to spend millions in Federal dollars earmarked for repairs.

Ms. Olatoye will be tasked with creating employment opportunities for residents, retro-fitting buildings for energy efficiency, and restoring faith with tenants, Mr. de Blasio said.

'Buck Stops At City Hall'

He added that while past Mayors had largely ignored public housing and blamed its shortfalls on Federal cuts, he would make it a priority. He noted that while Mayor Bloomberg had fought fiercely for mayoral control of schools, he had not done the same for the HA.

"The buck stops at City Hall from now on, when it comes to NYCHA," Mr. de Blasio said. "In past administrations...NYCHA was treated as a stepchild, as something separate."

Ms. Olatoye said she respected the Mayor's commitment to preserving and expanding public and affordable housing. "The agency needs to run effectively and efficiently," she said. "Our residents deserve and depend on it."

Her grandmother worked and lived in the Albany Houses in Connecticut, she noted. "The apartment made a huge difference in my grandmother's life and provided peace of mind," she said. But the agency has a long way to go, she added.

Benefits of Retro-Fitting

Investment in residents and employees would be central to rebuilding the agency's trust, she said. Retro-fitting to make the developments environmentally friendly would create jobs for residents, she said.

"I cannot wait to work with Shola and this administration to make New Yorkers proud of their public housing again," Mr. House added. "We've never had a leadership this committed to making that happen, and to treating our NYCHA tenants with the same respect as every other tenant in this city. We are ready to roll up our sleeves, get to work, and change the way we do business."

The Department of Housing Preservation and Development will be led by Vicki Been, Director of NYU's Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy, who has an esteemed academic background on land use and affordable housing.

'An Aggressive Approach'

"We're going to take a much more aggressive approach to protecting and building affordable

apartments,” said Ms. Been. “From apartments approaching the end of their subsidy to homes lost to Superstorm Sandy, we need faster and more innovative strategies that seize every opportunity to keep apartments affordable and accelerate the pace of bringing new ones online.”

Gary D. Rodney will be President of the Housing Development Corporation. He previously worked at HDC in various roles from 2001 to 2006, rising to Vice President for Development, before working at Omni New York LLC, a leading developer of affordable housing in the state.

“This work is truly a collaborative effort that includes housing advocates, community groups, developers, lenders, and an administration committed to long-lasting affordable housing,” he said. “We are going to continue to foster existing partnerships and aggressively seek out new ones to put more shovels in the ground.”