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Baltimore Neighborhoods Inc. Settles Steering Suit For \$250, 000

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Baltimore Neighborhoods, Inc. (BNI) and Fine Homes, a Delaware real estate firm, have settled a lawsuit alleging racial steering by real estate agents in northwest Baltimore for \$250,000. BNI said this is the largest settlement of a fair housing suit in the Baltimore metropolitan area. It will go to compensate the individuals who BNI alleged were discriminated against and to fund fair housing monitoring by Baltimore Neighborhoods.

The suit alleged that Fine Homes agents steered African-American customers away from predominantly white neighborhoods in northwest Baltimore country. It also said the agents steered white customers away from predominantly Africa-American and highly integrated neighborhoods in the Liberty Road corridor, in violation of anti-discrimination laws. The suit resulted from five "tests" conducted by BNI during 1989 in which a total of 11 African-American and white "testers" were sent to Fine Homes agents to seek homes valued at about \$100,000 in northwest Baltimore country. According to BNI, many of the 11 testers received different treatment based on their race.

BNI Won 30 Suits

BNI is a Baltimore-area organization devoted to the promotion of fair housing. Since 1983, BNI has been involved in 43 lawsuits alleging discrimination in the sale, rental or advertising of housing. More than 30 have been won or settled in favor of the group, according to its figures. This is the second time BNI has sued a Baltimore-area real estate agency for racial steering in the sale of homes. The previous real estate steering suit resulted in a confidential settlement.

BNI regularly sends out similar pairs of black and white "testers" to monitor racial discrimination against homebuyers. During 1989, it found "very striking patterns" of racial discrimination by the real estate company, said Andrew D. Freeman, an attorney representing the private, non-profit fair housing group.

"Blacks were almost never shown homes in Pikesville, Owings Mills and Reisterstown, (zip code 21208)" he explained, "and whites were almost never shown houses in (zip code) 21207." That area which includes most of Liberty Road south of Old Court Road, as well as Security and Woodlawn, is more racially integrated than the other communities in the test area, between Liberty and Reisterstown.

BNI has been paying "particular attention" to Northwest Baltimore County, said Martin A. Dyer, associate director of the group, "because we've received a lot of complaints from that area."

The publicity surrounding the September 10 settlement will let unscrupulous real estate agents know "that someone is watching," Mr. Dyer said

Nevertheless, the problem persists in the region, he added, judging from recent meetings with Randallstown-area community organizations and Comprehensive Housing Assistance, Inc. (CHAI), the Jewish federation's housing and community development agency.

A portion of the settlement amount will be used to compensate the testers, said Mr. Dyer. Liberty Road Community Council, one of the originators of the lawsuit, will receive \$10,500 of the settlement.

After attorney's fees and expenses, BNI will receive a significant part of the settlement,

which it will use "for more lawsuits and enforcement," Freeman said.

In addition to Andrew D. Freeman, BNI was also represented by C. Christopher Brown, both of the Baltimore firm of Brown, Goldstein and Levy. Attorneys for the company are Richard T. Sampson and Sharon Reynolds Stanton of Semmes, Bowen and Semmes.

It is the first time nationally that white plaintiffs have received compensation for steering, Freeman said.

The real estate firm said it chose to settle the case out of court to avoid the potentially onerous expense of litigation. The company, which no longer owns operations in Baltimore, said it is committed to the principles of fair housing and equal opportunity.

Bill Obriecht, a member of the community council said, "I think it is terrific in two senses, one that we do have a strong organization that is involved in trying to assure no racial steering occurs, and second, BNI is finally getting a return for its efforts."

