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In Parts of U.S. Northwest, a Changing Face

Economics Drive White Gentrification of Core Black Neighborhoods of Seattle and Portland

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PORTLAND, Ore. -- Already the whitest major city in America, Portland is rapidly becoming even whiter at its core.

"The heart of the black community is gone," said Charles Ford, 76, a black activist whose neighborhood in Portland has flipped in recent years from majority black to majority white. "There ain't no center anymore."

About 150 miles north in Seattle, the nation's second-whitest major city, the same process of downtown demographic bleaching is accelerating for the same reasons.

An invasion of young, well-educated and mostly white newcomers is buying up and remaking Seattle's Central District, the birthplace of Jimi Hendrix and the once-bluesy home of the young Ray Charles. What had been the largest black-majority community in the Pacific Northwest has become majority white.

"I am concerned and I am frustrated because I don't know what the alternatives are," said Norman Rice, who in the 1990s was Seattle's first and only black mayor. "It clearly isn't racist; it's economics. The real question you have to ask yourself is: Is this good or bad?"

White gentrification is hardly unique to Portland and Seattle. It is changing Harlem, the District of Columbia and many other cities. Demographers say it is especially noticeable in major California cities -- a function of population density, the desire to escape long commutes and the relative housing bargains in black neighborhoods.

But as white gentrification accelerates in Portland and Seattle, where the percentage of black residents was already the lowest among the nation's largest cities, it is erasing the only historically black neighborhoods these cities have ever had.

In many cities with large black populations, gentrification has caused only marginal racial change. In the District, for example, the percentage of white non-Hispanic residents increased 2.7 percent between 1990 and 2004, according to William H. Frey, a demographer at the Brookings Institution.

Still, Washington remains less than one-third white and about 60 percent black.

In Seattle's Central District, though, racial change is anything but marginal. The non-Hispanic white population in the area jumped from 31 percent in 1990 to 50 percent in 2000, according to the census.

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Local demographers say white growth since 2000 has gained momentum, while the percentage of black residents appears to have fallen to less than 40 percent. With real estate prices rollicking upward at about 25 percent a year, the Central District appears to be getting whiter and richer by the month.

As black residents leave the central areas of Portland and Seattle for the suburbs -- either because they have sold their homes or been forced out by higher rents -- their community is being splintered by geographic dispersal and racial integration.

"It's destroying us, socially and politically," said Ford, the neighborhood activist from Portland. "It is just a total inconvenience and disrespect to black folks."

Rice does not view the changes as nearly so dire, especially for people who have been able to sell their homes at a substantial profit and set aside money for retirement.

Census figures suggest that blacks in Seattle and Portland have not been displaced into homelessness and that they are not economically worse off in the suburbs than they were downtown. In many cases, housing in the suburbs is newer, schools are better and crime is lower.

But Rice said that newly suburbanized African Americans in Seattle and Portland are being isolated from one another and "will have to find new places to embrace our black heritage."

With attendance falling, some black churches in Seattle and Portland have moved or are opening second sanctuaries in the suburbs.

"I have begged our people not to sell their properties but to no avail," said the Rev. Reggie Witherspoon, pastor of Mount Calvary Christian Center, a church in the Central District that is trying to open a second location in Seattle's southern suburbs, where many parishioners have moved. "A good majority of them have decided they cannot afford to drive into the city, so they have joined suburban white churches."

Neither blacks nor whites, Rice said, appear to have found a way to stop or slow the disappearance of core black neighborhoods. "They are concerned, but they don't have an option or a plan," he said.

The pressures of growth, worsening traffic congestion and the rising price of gasoline seem certain to make the hunt for close-in, upscale housing even more obsessive in the next two decades.

"The location of the Central District is so superior to the suburbs -- it has great views, it's close to downtown and to the University of Washington -- that there's a tremendous incentive to buy, especially for people with no kids or the money to send them to private schools," said Richard Morrill, a demographer and professor emeritus at the University of Washington.

Over the next two decades, Seattle is predicting the creation of 50,000 jobs in the central city, which amounts to nearly a 25 percent increase in a job base that tends to be high-wage and highly skilled. Portland, too, is growing, largely by attracting young, well-educated newcomers from California and the East Coast.

In both Seattle and Portland, which take considerable pride in being green, liberal and tolerant, the fading away of black inner-city communities has occasioned considerable hand-wringing among the overwhelmingly white population. Portland is 75 percent white, and Seattle 68 percent white.

"Many of the white liberals who condemned white flight are just as angry at the white folks who are moving back into the cities," Dan Savage, editor of the Stranger, an alternative weekly in Seattle, wrote last month in his blog about movement from Seattle in the 1950s, '60s and '70s.

The dispersal of African Americans is also an embarrassing reminder of why they were concentrated in the

first place -- and of a time when neither Portland nor Seattle was especially tolerant.

In the '50s and '60s, when the black population was growing in the region, restrictive real estate covenants and racial prejudice kept most African Americans in selected central areas of the two cities.

"Finally, the African American community is able to make the same choice about where it's going to live as the white community," Rice said. "They are choosing to move. Is that bad or not? Stay tuned."

In northeast Portland, where Ford has been complaining for years about gentrification, he acknowledges that the tipping point has come and gone. White folks are taking over, he said, and blacks folks are all but gone.

Recently, Ford took a reporter on a tour of his gentrified neighborhood. En route, he discovered that a not-so-handsome house was for sale for \$400,000. The price astonished him, especially because the house was considerably smaller than his own.

"When I see prices like that, I wonder who . . . of my race can continue to live here," he said.

Ford began ruminating about the price -- and the profit -- he might be able to get for his house, which he has owned since 1968 and which sits on a fine corner lot near a fixed-up city park.

"I have said I would never sell," Ford said. "But who can resist these prices?"

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