

# A Dream Rezoned:

Navigating Possibilities within Portland's Long History of Racist Planning



Written and edited by  
Cleo Davis, Kayin Talton Davis,  
and Carolyn M. Leonard

## Have you ever wondered why different parts of Portland look the way that they do?

Why do some neighborhoods have large single-family homes with manicured lawns and long driveways while others are overflowing with one-story houses? Is there a reason that some neighborhoods have no grocery stores or gas stations close by?

**THE GOAL** of urban planning is “to maximize the health, safety, and economic well-being of residents (and visitors) while considering the unique desires, and culture of those who live, work, learn, pray, and play within the community.”

Who decides

## how land is used?

City of Portland Planners work in several different departments:

- Bureau of Planning and Sustainability (BPS)
- Bureau of Transportation (PBOT)
- Bureau of Development Services (BDS)
- Portland Water Bureau
- Bureau of Environmental Services (BES)
- Parks and Recreation

**A LARGE PART OF PLANNING** includes creating **zoning regulations**. These rules define what and where things can be built, groups similar things together, and keeps things that don't go well together apart. What you can build depends on where your property is located.

**Zoning** can be controversial because people have different ideas about how a building or neighborhood block should look, or how a neighborhood or city should grow. The practice of zoning focuses on the size and shape of buildings and how they are used, but it also includes other decisions that can impact how neighborhoods grow and change over time.

**HISTORICALLY**, people in different neighborhoods, especially, Black, Indigenous, and other Peoples of Color have not been included in **the planning and rezoning process**. Leaving people out of the planning process is not fair and it causes problems. It means that their voices are not heard, and their needs are not being met.

How did we get here?

Thousands of years before Oregon became a territory, the land was inhabited by more than 60 tribes that spoke at least 18 languages across hundreds of villages.

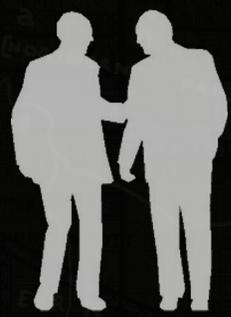
**BUT BEGINNING IN THE 1810s**, the homeland of Indigenous people was taken through war and diseases brought to the area by white migrants. Though Marcus Lopez, a Black man, came to the Pacific Northwest in 1788, other Black people were barred from the settlement even before Oregon became a territory. Oregon's original state constitution blocked Black people from settling in the state until it was changed in 1926. Author Matt Novak states that Oregon was a "white utopia".

In 1844, some Oregon towns had "Sundown laws," meaning that only white people could live there and that anyone who wasn't white had to leave the town before the sun set. These laws were enforced by intimidation, whippings, and other forms of violence.

**THE UNITED STATES HAS A LONG HISTORY OF RACISM** and discrimination against people of color. Oregon and the City of Portland's own history, systems, and policies show how racism has shaped our city. Racially biased planning and policies have prevented people of color from building communities in and around Portland, and are part of the reason why, for decades, Portland has been called the largest "white city" in the US.

The three branches of government continued to deny Black, Indigenous, and other Peoples of Color the same opportunities as white people. Generations of people were denied freedom, equality, and justice. In other words, claiming the land of the Indigenous people for free, building a home, participating in state and city government, voting, testifying in court, and attending public schools was not legal for anyone except white people. Interracial marriage was also illegal.

**WITHIN THIS CONTEXT, PORTLAND BECAME A CITY EIGHT YEARS** before the Oregon Territory became a state. The Oregon Constitution, and the legislative, judicial and executive branches of government were designed to give freedom and rights to most white men and limited rights to white women. From the very beginning, Portland created laws (ordinances) and systems that restricted wealth, education, employment, land ownership, and housing for Black, Indigenous, and other Peoples of Color. The harm caused by discrimination based on race, color, and culture impacted and continues to impact generations of people, and the damage done to these communities, especially Black people, can never be repaid.



This is a story about one Black family who has positively impacted [Portland's racist history of city planning](#) — calling attention to how the family was able to focus on their dream in spite of past disappointments.

# The Dream

**2** IN ARIZONA, THE DAVIS FAMILY WORKED as “cotton contractors,” but they were also accomplished in building trades, including architecture and structural engineering. “Mama Julia”, as she was affectionately called, purchased property that she believed had great development potential.

**3** FOR \$20,000, SHE BOUGHT A LOT with two buildings on it. On the front of the lot was a seven-unit apartment building and on the back of the lot was a small, one-story house.

**4** THOUGH THE TWO BUILDINGS NEEDED a lot of work, the Davis family had the skills necessary to build a house from the ground up. The family intended to live in the house while renovating the large building so that they could have seven apartments that would generate rent. With great anticipation, the Davis family submitted their plans and permits for approval by the City of Portland.

**5** RELYING ON THE FACT that the City had recently eliminated its anti-Black housing and land-use policies, the Davises were confident that their plans and permits would be approved.

**The Fair Housing Act was enacted in 1968 to prevent discrimination of people based on race, national origin, and religion.**

**The act expanded previous acts and prohibited discrimination concerning the sale, rental, and financing of housing based on race, religion, national origin, sex, (and as amended) disability and family status.**

**1** JIM CROW LAWS forced the Davis family to leave the South in the 1940s. They traveled to Arizona seeking freedom, independence, and the right to pursue their goal of owning property and creating wealth for their extended family. Through their efforts, the Davis family was able to influence city planning and to grow community power.



# A Dream Crushed

**“MAMA JULIA” SOON DISCOVERED** that even though policies had been changed decades before, many of the racist policies and attitudes had not changed.

The dream of renovating the apartment building was crushed; the City denied the Davis family’s plans and permit applications.

**FROM 1940S THROUGH 1990S**, to ward off the so-called “blight,” the City of Portland actively targeted Black homeowners with fines.

**PORTLAND HAS A LONG HISTORY** of racist land-use practices that have created and reinforced segregation and inequities. Some early examples include exclusionary zoning, racial restrictive covenants, and redlining.



## Tale of Two Cities: N/NE vs SW Portland

How does the neighborhood that you live in effect how you can participate in the urban planning process?

Check out how the experience has been different for people living in North/Northeast and Southwest Portland through past plans.

**ALBINA COMMUNITY PLAN (1993)** was the first community plan outside of the Central City. It consisted of large parts of North/Northeast Portland, where Black communities had historically resided.

Through the Albina Plan, the City tried to address its prolonged divestment in the area by boosting economic development and bringing investments and improvements to Albina. This provided grounds for the City to rezone large portions of single-family residential to higher-density zoning to help meet growth goals. Major corridors such as N. Interstate, N. Vancouver Avenue, and N. Williams received some of the highest-density, meaning the population in those areas skyrocketed. The Albina Plan set the stage for gentrification and displacement of Portland’s Black residents years later. The Albina Plan resulted in rapid gentrification and racial transition in the 1990s.

**INTERSTATE CORRIDOR URBAN RENEWAL AREA (ICURA) PLAN (2000)** caused further displacement of Black Portlanders in the Interstate Corridor Urban Renewal Area where over 4,000 households (10,000 Black residents) were displaced between 1990 and 2016.

The City developed investments along Interstate Avenue in anticipation of a new MAX light rail line. With no more funding for urban renewal, the City raised taxes to fund the project. The City prioritized local funding for the MAX line and failed to implement the anti-displacement goals and policies.

**SOUTHWEST COMMUNITY PLAN (2000)** preserved much of the single-family zoning for Southwest residents who tended to be well-educated, higher income, typically white, and had better access to resources and tools like neighborhood associations that enabled them to organize and attend public hearings.

In 1996, planners made a draft zoning map for discussion that included rezoning large areas of lower density single-family zoning. The SW community was enraged and was given the opportunity to propose their own zoning maps.

The final plan was drastically different from the initial plan. Much of the single-family zoning was preserved with some density added along main corridors, but the change was far less significant than the previous community plans.

**“MAMA JULIA”, grandmother of local artist Cleo Davis Jr.’s**, was someone who experienced the problems of being targeted as a Black person living in Portland. The property she purchased was “red-tagged” and all efforts to salvage the building were rejected.

The Davis family was not only forced to give up ownership of the building that was bulldozed by a contractor, but she was forced to pay the contractor and administrative fees tacked on by the City.

**THE DAVIS FAMILY** found that the City of Portland was still upholding its racist urban planning practices and attitudes. Practices for devaluing property were overwhelmingly applied to properties in neighborhoods where Black people live, such as the Albina neighborhood. Opportunities were severely limited, and this made it nearly impossible to buy, sell, or make improvements on property.

On October 10, 1991, the Davis family had to fight for their property yet again. The City of Portland filed a complaint invoking Multnomah County Ordinance 422.

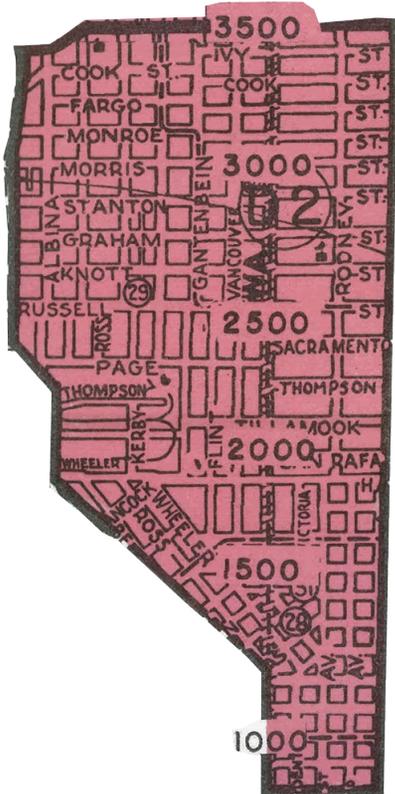
**THIS ORDINANCE** has nine sections, and it makes it legal for the Portland Police to seize property from any person who engages in illegal activity in Multnomah County (in some instances without a court proceeding).

**With the help of an attorney, “Mama Julia” won the legal battle and retained her property.**

However, over the years, \$2.5 million dollars in potential rent that could have helped build the Davis family’s generational wealth was lost.

The Davises stood up to the authorities and were able to hold on to their property, but this is not the way situations like this usually turn out.

**MANY PEOPLE DO NOT UNDERSTAND** that without legal representation, they could simply have their property taken without a legal hearing in court. Property owners who were not engaged in illegal activities could have their property seized because of the activities of renters or squatters who were responsible for illegal activities.



**What is “generational wealth” and how does it perpetuate inequity?**

**Generational wealth is any kind of asset, cash, investment fund, or property, that families pass down to their children or grandchildren.**

**SYSTEMIC RACISM has made it very difficult for Black Americans to build generational wealth.**

Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter, **Nikole Hannah-Jones** described it this way: **“BLACK PEOPLE WERE DENIED ACCESS** to colleges, were denied access to high schools, were denied access to higher paying jobs.

And when Black people were able to get some land or to build a business, oftentimes they face those businesses being stolen or burned down or destroyed.”

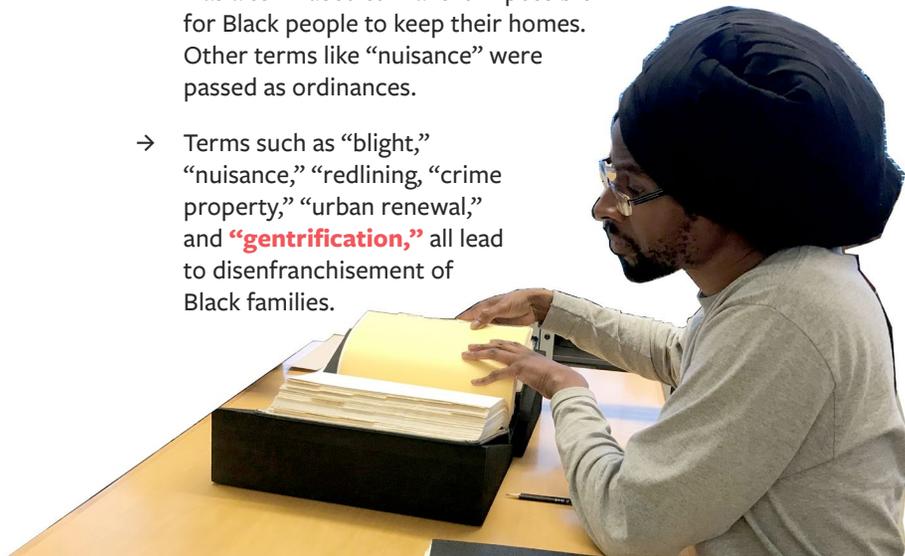
**A report** by the Institute for Economic Equity at the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis found that while a typical white millennial family has about \$88,000 in wealth, the typical Black millennial family has only about \$5,000 in wealth and while about two-thirds of white millennials own homes, less than a third of Black millennials own homes.

# An Opportunity Surfaces

**IN EARLY 2018**, Cleo Davis Jr., and his wife Kayin Talton-Davis accepted **“artists-in-residence” positions at the City of Portland Archives and Records Center**. During their residency, they conducted research, reviewed old records, deeds, titles, and City of Portland Council minutes, policies and city planning documents.

**THE ARTISTS-IN-RESIDENCE** positions at the Portland City Archives and Records yielded results far more than Cleo and Kayin ever expected. The hours and hours that they spent conducting research made them want to continue to learn more about the racist planning and processes that specifically targeted Black people. It became very clear that there is a continued and very deliberate attempt to keep Black people from successfully buying and holding on to homes.

- **Redlining** was used to keep Black people from purchasing property in places they might chose. Covenants and deeds specifically stated that Black people were not wanted and would not be allowed to buy property in certain parts of town. Predatory lending made them pay a higher price and rate of interest for property. Many lending institutions would not lend money to Black people at all. If the person already had a home and wanted to sell, the property was devalued. Further, being located where Black people lived made the property less valuable. The City divested in places where Black people lived.
- Special policies were used to disenfranchise Black people. **“Blight”** was a term used to make it impossible for Black people to keep their homes. Other terms like “nuisance” were passed as ordinances.
- Terms such as “blight,” “nuisance,” “redlining,” “crime property,” “urban renewal,” and **“gentrification,”** all lead to disenfranchisement of Black families.



## **Blight**

A designation of a condition of a site, structure or area that deems it and nearby buildings and/or areas as unattractive, a “nuisance” or negatively impacted by its residents. Often used to justify the removal of Black and other residents of color.

## **Downzoning**

A change from the current zoning classification of land to reduce the intensity or density of development permitted. The opposite is upzoning.

## **Divestment**

Households or businesses involuntarily forced to move from a neighborhood because of increasing market values, rents, or changes in the neighborhood’s ability to meet basic needs in the case of households, or erosion of traditional client base in the case of businesses.

## **Gentrification**

A process of neighborhood change that includes economic change in a historically divested neighborhood — by means of real estate investment and new higher-income residents moving in — as well as demographic change — not only in terms of income level, but also the education level or racial make-up of residents.

## **Racial exclusionary zoning**

A type of exclusionary zoning, racial zoning was the practice of enacting ordinances (laws) that designated separate living areas for Black families. Ordinances prohibited Black people from buying homes on blocks where white people were a majority.

## **Redlining**

A discriminatory practice by which banks and insurance companies, among other industries, refuse or limit loans, mortgages, and insurance coverage within specific geographic areas with high populations of Black, Indigenous, and other Peoples of Color.

## **Red-tagging**

Part of a color-tagged structure in the United States which classifies the overall condition of a building, from red signifying dangerous conditions to green signifying little to no damage.

## **Restrictive covenants**

Lists of obligations that purchasers of property must assume, including what colors they use to paint their homes and what types of trees they plant in their yards; common clauses required homeowners never to sell or rent their houses to Black, Indigenous, and other Peoples of Color.

## **Upzoning**

A change from the current zoning classification of land to increase the intensity or density of development permitted. The opposite is downzoning.

## **Urban renewal**

The large-scale and comprehensive act or process of replacing housing and public works considered substandard or outdated.

Urban renewal programs often disproportionately impact the elderly, racial minorities, and people experiencing poverty.

Residents in urban renewal areas are often forced to move or cannot afford to live in the newly renovated areas (because of higher taxes or rent) and are thus displaced and replaced by wealthier individuals in a process called gentrification.

**CLEO AND KAYIN LEARNED** about the City of Portland's need to find another space to relocate a house located close to their property. They saw this as an opportunity for the City and the Davises to reach an agreement that would be beneficial to both parties!

**AFTER EXPERIENCING THE POWER** of sharing knowledge and working with communities, Cleo and Kayin began to use their residency research to work with staff in the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability.

This collaboration resulted in the City of Portland beginning to acknowledge the harm their policies and practices have inflicted on Black communities in NE Portland. In response to the Davis' research and testimony in City Council, Mayor Wheeler publicly apologized to the Davis family.

**The City also agreed to allow the relocation of the Mayo house** onto the Davis' property through **Ordinance 189350** and waived the \$40,000 in relocation fees.

## The Mayo House



**The Mayo House** is a historical house built by Martin Nicholas Mayo in Portland's Eliot neighborhood. It is notable for being relocated in 1912, 1930, and 2019 to avoid demolition to make room for new construction projects. The house uses the Queen Anne architecture style.

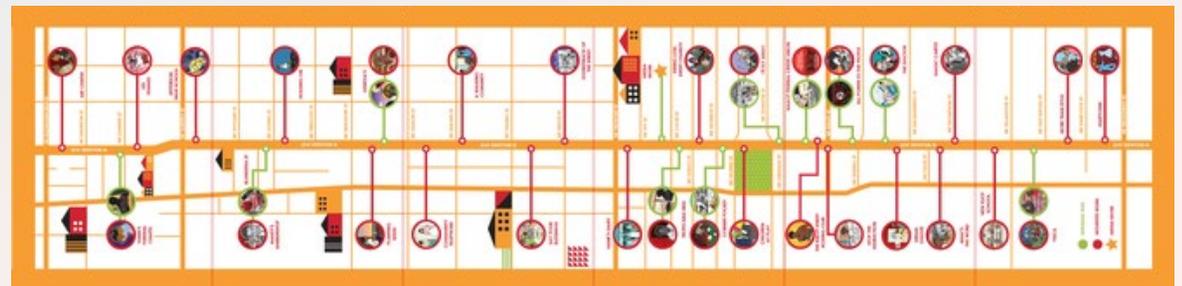
Cleo Davis is repurposing the house into a site for local art and history to be archived and made available to the public. The new archive will be used to show the history Black Portland.

**THE RACIST SYSTEM IS CHANGING** because people like Cleo and Kayin are applying their knowledge and skills to hold the City government accountable for serving all populations in a fair and just manner.

They shared their findings through an artist's lens, creating "**Blightxploitation**," an exhibit detailing the racist planning practices and Black resilience and history in partnership with the **Black Williams Project**.

**CLEO AND KAYIN** used the skills they gained from their work in the City of Portland Archives and collaboration with City staff.

**They fought back, and they won.**





## The Future

### **The past and the present must be understood before the future can be discussed.**

**IT IS IMPORTANT** that those communities who have been excluded, hurt, oppressed, and discriminated against for nearly two centuries are involved in rebuilding systems that are fair, equitable provide justice for all.

**EVERY RESIDENT** in the City of Portland can be involved in making Portland a city where all people can live, learn, love, and thrive. Even within our different racial communities, there are diversity of voices and needs that deserves to be heard (e.g., immigrant status, age, sexual orientation, cultural background, economic security, housing status, belief systems, etc.).

There are those who were personally affected by the divestment, the promise of assistance with relocation or the right to return, unresolved issues and broken promises. The intent and impact of decisions that are made should consider the needs of each member of our diverse community.

**ALL GROUPS** should have an authentic representative at the planning and decision-making table. An authentic representative should be a member of the community they represent, has lived and understands the conditions and needs of the community, and has knowledge related to the subject discussed. The representative gathers and discuss options and possibilities with others in the group that they represent.

**The Albina Vision Trust (AVT)** is an example of an organization that knows the history and is shaping the future alongside community members. The organization is led by Chair Rukaiyah Adams and Executive Director Winta Yohannes, and is guided by a board and leadership council composed of community leaders. It aims to rebuild a slice of Lower Albina and create an anchor for the city's Black Community, a welcoming place not only for displaced residents but new ones as well. There is a 50-year vision with dozens of moving parts. AVT intends to pursue a strategy grounded in building community wealth and real estate ownership, giving its level of control over a project that would not exist if multiple private developers were working independently.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

**City planning processes are necessary and effective, but can also be harmful to those left out of the planning processes.**

The City's apology to the Davis family was a necessary step toward acknowledging its negative impacts on Portland's Black community, but more needs to be done.

By centering community input, the City can have more equitable results.

- **ONE INDIVIDUAL can impact City policies and positive change for the entire city.**
- **URBAN PLANNING, including land use, transportation, utilities, and environmental planning can result in unintended outcomes that harm communities.**
- **THE CITY can improve the services offered to Portland residents by centering community experience and stories and collaborating with them directly.**
- **ARTISTS play an important role in communicating the role of individuals in the City's decision-making process and how to envision creative solutions.**

**THE PORTLAND ARCHIVES & RECORDS CENTER** is where the City of Portland's historical government records are kept. Their offices are part of the independent City Auditor's Office, and they are here to help ensure Portland residents have open and accountable city government, through public access to city records.

City of Portland Archives and Regional Arts and Culture Council, created the Artist-in-Residence opportunity, inviting artists to use an artist lens on the City of Portland's historical records.

This residency allows for a deep investigation into what archives represent in society and creates space for expression of an understanding of archives.

## Organizations to follow:

- [A Black Art Ecology of Portland](#)
- [Albina Vision Trust](#)
- [Black and Beyond the Binary](#)
- [Imagine Black](#)
- [Nat Turner Project](#)
- [Ori Gallery](#)

## Media to watch:

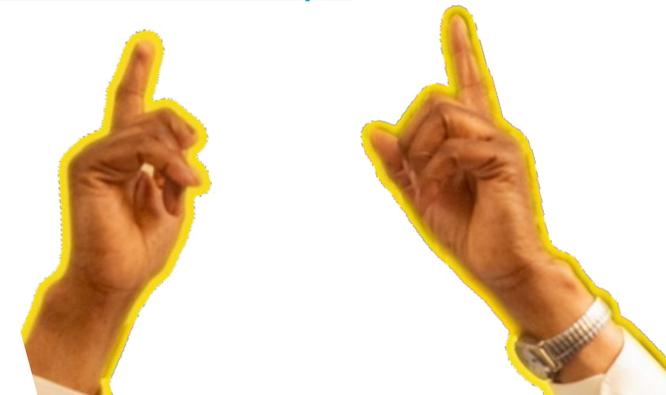
- [Root Shocked](#)
- OPB: [Local Color](#)
- OPB: [Jazz Town](#)
- KGW: [History of Portland's Albina Neighborhood \(1967\)](#)
- KGW: [Albina 1980](#)

# Get involved and eliminate barriers!

- **A MORE INCLUSIVE CITY** government is possible when all communities have a voice in decisions that affect them; but where do you start?
- **LEARN ABOUT CITY OF PORTLAND'S [government structure](#):** Portland's current governmental system is called a commission form of government. The five members of City Council serve as legislators and administrators of individual government agencies (called "bureaus"). Each city commissioner oversees multiple bureaus.
- **TESTIFY DURING COUNCIL MEETINGS:** [Use your voice!](#) Every Wednesday, the city holds council meetings in City Hall Chambers. These meetings are open to the public and include time for the public to share their thoughts.
- **JOIN AN ADVISORY BODY:** One way to provide input is by [joining an advisory body](#). There are over 65 advisory bodies in the City of Portland, engaged in issues ranging from historic landmarks to public campaign finance.
- **VOTE:** If you are 18 years or older, an Oregon resident, and a U.S. citizen, you have the right to vote in Oregon. Thanks to Oregon's Motor Voter Act, any citizen who is issued (or renews) an ID or license through the DMV is automatically registered to vote! You can update your voter registration and learn about upcoming elections by visiting [Multnomah County Elections](#).

## Resources

- City of Portland, Bureau of Planning and Sustainability: [Historical Context of Racist Planning](#)
- [City of Portland Archives and Records Center](#)
- National Geographic: Article: ["Oregon once legally banned Black People. Has the State reconciled its racist history?"](#)
- Oregon Historical Society: [Images of African Americans of Portland](#) by Kimberly Moreland
- OPB: [Portland Strives to Save Portland Mayo House](#)
- [Peculiar Paradise A History of Blacks in Oregon 1788-1940](#) by Elizabeth McLagan
- [Looking Back in Order to Move Forward: An Often-Untold History Affecting Oregon's Past of US Racial, Immigration and Educational History](#) by Elizabeth McLagan-Oregon School Board Association
- Portland Business Journal: ["A bold vision for Albina to rebuild, reunite and right past wrongs"](#)
- Institute for Local Government: [Glossary of Land Use and Planning Terms](#)
- Brentin Mock for Bloomberg CityLab: [The Meaning of Blight](#)
- Learning for Justice: [Vocabulary adapted from The Color of Law: Creating Racially Segregated Communities](#)
- Urban Displacement Project: [Gentrification Explained](#)
- City of Portland, Bureau of Planning and Sustainability: [Anti-Displacement Action Plan, Foundation Report](#)



**This zine was brought to you by City of Portland's  
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**Written and edited by**

Cleo Davis, Kayin Talton Davis,  
and Carolyn M. Leonard

**Developed by**

Pollyanne Birge  
City of Portland  
Office of Community & Civic Life

Gaby Jenkins  
City of Portland  
Bureau of Planning and Sustainability

Perla Sitcov  
City of Portland  
Office of Community & Civic Life

**Designed by**

Sharita Towne

\*zine imagery footnotes [here](#)

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**Dedicated to:**

**“Mama Julia” Davis and her persistent  
effort towards prosperity through family  
achievement and Black wealth within  
the Albina community.**



THE BUREAU OF  
**PLANNING &  
SUSTAINABILITY**



OFFICE OF  
Community  
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PORTLAND  
**CITY AUDITOR**  
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Regional Arts &  
Culture Council