

Keeping Our Community: An Update from Mayor Morse on the Lyman Terrace debate

by [Alex Morse](#) on Wednesday, August 29, 2012

Throughout my first months as mayor, a major priority of my administration has been the redevelopment and revitalization of Holyoke's downtown. One issue in this effort has galvanized public attention and stirred emotions like no other: the redevelopment of Lyman Terrace. Most everyone concedes that the current state of the Lyman Terrace buildings is unacceptable; its structural flaws and health risks are many and varied. Given the common ground and goals we share, the debate over how we improve these conditions has become polarized beyond what it should be.

In a previous letter, I articulated my vision for a diverse, densely populated, vibrant, and prosperous downtown, with quality housing for all who seek it. Such are the principles that guide my decision-making. I understand that those principles could have been made clearer from the outset, and for that, I take full responsibility. I would like to take this opportunity to change that, and to update Holyokers on the steps my administration is taking to move forward.

It is important to note that the Holyoke Housing Authority (HHA) owns the property at Lyman Terrace; the City of Holyoke does not. And several months ago, in an effort to expedite the improvements to Lyman Terrace, the HHA informed me that they would be seeking improvement proposals from private developers. Furthermore, they informed me that they were seeking permission from the Department of Housing and Urban Development to demolish all or part of the housing complex were such a need to arise. As part of an administrative process that would enable the HHA to access federal funds for demolition, I signed their request for an environmental assessment.

Per the request of the HHA, I have since evaluated the proposals for the property's improvement by a few developers. As yet, I have not been satisfied by those received. The ones I have reviewed would reduce the population of the neighborhood, take significant time to even begin the improvements, and have been generally misaligned with my guiding principles for the downtown. Upon further exploration, I also became dissatisfied with the HHA's tenant relocation plan; Lyman's tenants need to have better protections at the local level if we wish to keep as many residents as possible in Holyoke.

The shortcomings of this process have awoken genuine concern, fear, and resentment among many in the community. Considering the longstanding

neglect of Lyman Terrace at the local level, such reactions are perfectly understandable. Furthermore, equating urban renewal with urban removal has been a widely practiced strategy across our country; and, as such, skepticism of our own project is warranted. We are now tasked with avoiding these only too common pitfalls, and how we do so collectively will say a great deal about who we are as a community.

As mayor, my responsibility is first and foremost to the people of Holyoke – and I cannot allow this process to be executed carelessly. I am thus announcing the following steps to realign the renovation of Lyman Terrace with the principles I have outlined above.

As of today, I have asked the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to suspend the HHA's request for a demolition review. I cannot in good conscience support any demolition of Lyman Terrace – total or partial – until our citizens have ample opportunity to have their voices heard regarding the community needs there. I will not seek approval for any action until a comprehensive plan, crafted with community input, is in place. This policy will affect lives in tangible ways, and people should have every right to reclaim the stake they have in our city's future.

I have reached out to housing experts outside of the city for their support in assisting the HHA. As a result, I can proudly announce a partnership between the Massachusetts Development Finance Agency, the Massachusetts Housing Partnership, and the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development. To the HHA's credit, they have demonstrated good faith in following my lead moving forward; they have agreed to work closely with these organizations. Through rigorous community involvement – especially of Lyman Terrace's residents – these organizations will assist our city and the HHA to develop a comprehensive plan for the area bordered by the first level canal, Lyman Street, Dwight Street, and High Street.

And finally, I am calling on the HHA to be more responsive to the immediate needs of Lyman Terrace's tenants. Planning for Lyman's future does not mean ignoring its present, and there is no reason that the basic upkeep of the property should be neglected.

It is important that we get this right. And in order to so, we must take advantage of these new partners and the resources they will provide. Coming up with a plan for this part of Center City will be a community effort. We will use our new resources to guarantee our citizens a seat at the planning table – by holding public hearings, providing interpreters, and whatever else is necessary to ensure their voices are heard.

I do not know what a renovated Lyman Terrace will look like when this process is completed; that will depend greatly on the input of residents, businesses, and property owners. What I do know is that the plan must be consistent with a long-term vision for our downtown as a diverse, densely populated, vibrant, and prosperous place. The rehabilitated complex should properly connect to its surrounding amenities. Furthermore, it should include key components that the current property lacks: more green spaces, sufficient parking, and a community center.

The revitalization of our downtown depends on the energy of the people who live there and love our city, not merely the buildings that line the streets. Holyoke was built to accommodate 60,000 people. Growing our population must entail keeping people in Holyoke, not forcing them out. It is true that some tenant relocation is inevitable as we improve Lyman Terrace; but in the event of such relocation, the HHA needs to have a plan that gives as many residents as possible the option to relocate in our city. And when the improvements are completed, those residents that wish to return to the redeveloped Lyman Terrace should have priority placement to do so. These folks are the ones who have worked for years to maintain and beautify their homes, and they deserve a fair chance to reclaim the improved neighborhood.

I know our city is up to this task. We understand the stakes. Indeed, our resolution of this issue will say a great deal about who we are as a community. Working together, we can ensure not only an improved downtown, but also a more just and decent community for us all to share, and to which we all may contribute.