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As Space Gets Scarcer in NYC, Affordable Housing Costs Should Be Covered by Federal Government, Council Speaker Says

by *Chris Cruz*

The federal government must do more to meet demand for affordable public housing in New York City's diverse cultural neighborhoods, City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito told JP during a phone interview last Friday.

The council speaker said that although the city has the largest amount of public housing in the country, there is no interest from the federal government to expand the program as demand for it grows.



Photo Courtesy of Flickr/William Alariste. City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito at Tuesday's hearing.

“We have to get the federal government to invest in the public housing stock that exists. It's eroding, it's in bad shape. For every dollar we need to maintain our public housing stock, we are only getting back like 83 or 84 cents on the dollar. So over time there's been a shriveling up of federal resources and that's why we have \$18 billion in capital needs.”

The city is moving toward its goal of building more than 80,000 new [affordable housing units](#) in the next decade, and it recently pushed toward that goal by announcing the construction of almost [500 affordable housing units](#) in the South Bronx and Brooklyn. The new plan will charge below-market rent for those earning between 20% and 60% of the median area income.

In 2014, the [median income](#) in The Bronx was \$34,284, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. By comparison, the [median income](#) in Brooklyn was \$46,958, lower than in Manhattan (\$71,656), Staten Island (\$74,043) and Queens (\$57,210).

However, much of that money has gone toward ends of the city that separate individuals and families from the customs, culture and religion that they know. This can prohibit some, including within the Orthodox Jewish community, from taking part in the public housing program, unless it is placed in a neighborhood that includes shared religious and cultural elements.

Mark-Viverito thinks that if more people were invested in public housing, displacement from the community wouldn't occur.

“We need to advocate for [the state and federal government] to continue to give us the resources to boost up and bring our public housing up to code and up to date,” she said.

The city competes with real estate developers that have built residential units at a record pace. The New York City Department of Buildings signed off on the construction of 56,528 new residential units in 2015, which is an almost 200% increase from 2014, according to a [report](#) by New York Building Congress.

The city also competes with the rising cost of living in a city that has become too expensive for low-income families. As more people move from Manhattan and Brooklyn in search of affordable housing costs for rental properties and homes continue to rise, making fewer units available for those earning below the median income.

The only neighborhoods in the city where families with a \$55,000 income can live are in Fordham, Parkchester and Concourse, which are all located in the Bronx, according to an [interactive database on DNAinfo](#) that is based on 2016 Streeteasy rental data. Household incomes making less than that suggests that earners would need share space or live outside the city.

With these competing forces, Mark-Viverito said that housing subsidies would be needed for more people to access affordable housing, which she says, is not just a “poverty” problem, but is something that all New Yorkers face because of the rising cost of living.

“The more subsidies we can get to build more affordable housing units, which is what the Mayor had laid out, and in the ‘[mandatory inclusionary housing](#),’ which we just approved in the city council, that’s going to allow us to build more affordable units throughout all sectors of the city,” Mark-Viverito said, referring to an amendment approved in March 2016 to make new housing permanently affordable.

(This article is part of a series from an interview with Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito being released this week.)