



Carla J. Robinson

LAND LINES: *How did you come to be associated with the Lincoln Institute?*

CARLA ROBINSON: In 1999 I served as the Lincoln Institute's liaison with Spelman College for the planning of the Atlanta University Center Community Urban Summit, sponsored by Spelman and the four other institutions in the Atlanta University Center (AUC), a consortium of historically black colleges and universities. The two-day summit brought together community leaders, government officials, and faculty, staff, and students from the AUC institutions to identify critical issues for the future development of the surrounding communities and to begin developing strategies for addressing them. Representatives from Hampton University in Virginia, Trinity College in Connecticut, and the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey shared information about their university-community partnerships. The summit laid the groundwork for improved relations and communication between the AUC institutions and their surrounding communities. It was one of Lincoln's early projects in the area of university-community partnerships.

LAND LINES: *What was the impetus for the Sustainability of Communities project?*

CARLA ROBINSON: This new project grows out of work initiated by John Davis, who is also a Lincoln Institute visiting fellow (see *Land Lines*, October 2007). He served as a workshop leader at an April 2007 regional conference on community land trusts (CLTs) that took place in North Carolina. The conference participants included grassroots leaders from African-American communities in Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina. By the second day of the conference, their shared interest in the CLT as a means of gaining greater control of land in their communities surfaced as a key issue. In response, Davis worked quickly with Dannie Bolden, who was then the secretary of the National Community Land Trust Network, and Mary O'Hara, his colleague at Burlington Associates in Community Development, to arrange a lunch meeting so the leaders could voice their concerns and discuss ways to address them.

The community leaders described a number of troubling situations: increased interest in land among developers looking to build resort and retirement projects in their communities; the opportunistic use of cloudy land titles and property tax delinquency by developers and others seeking to take land and homes from unsuspecting families; government use of "blight" designations in black neighborhoods in order to secure federal funds and then allocate those funds to other neighborhoods; a history of environmental degradation that resulted in depressed land values in black communities; the loss of major employers that had been located in their communities for years; and the intentional exclusion of black residents and leaders from public planning processes affecting their neighborhoods.

In May 2008 the Lincoln Institute and the National Community Land Trust Network sponsored a follow-up meeting to get more information about the problems the communities face and determine how we might be able to assist them. The participants included representatives from four CLTs located in the southeastern United States, seven other community-based organizations in Georgia and South Carolina, a local college, a transit-oriented redevelopment project that is underway in Atlanta, a national foundation, and several organizations that provide technical and financial assistance to community-based organizations.

The community leaders expressed concern about many of the same issue that emerged during the earlier meeting in North Carolina. They emphasized the historic and cultural significance of their communities and noted that often those features are overlooked in the development process. During a meeting sponsored by the National Community Land Trust Academy the day prior to this meeting, participants heard leaders from the New Town community in Gainesville, Georgia, tell of their struggle against environmental contamination. Residents of that community, which sits on a

As a visiting fellow at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy in 2008–2009, Carla Robinson is providing leadership for the Sustainability of Communities project in the Department of Economic and Community Development. She earned an undergraduate degree in economics from Harvard University, and master's and doctoral degrees in city and regional planning from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Most of Robinson's work has focused on local development policy and planning, with an emphasis on the distribution of benefits associated with public investments. She previously served as research director at the National Housing Institute in New Jersey, and as senior associate at the Center for the Study of Social Policy in Washington, DC. She has held faculty, research, administration, and outreach positions at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Georgia Institute of Technology, Spelman College, Georgia State University, and the University of Georgia. She has also worked as an independent consultant on neighborhood development and planning issues.

Her research on local economic development has been published in the International Journal of Public Administration, the Journal of the American Planning Association, the Journal of Urban Affairs, and the Review of Black Political Economy. In May 2008 she completed a Lincoln Institute working paper titled "Valuation and Taxation of Resale-restricted, Owner-occupied Housing," which is posted on the Institute Web site.

landfill and is adjacent to several industrial sites that emit toxins, suffer from unusually high rates of certain cancers and lupus.

LAND LINES: *Is the Sustainability of Communities project concerned mainly about environmental justice?*

CARLA ROBINSON: That certainly is one of our concerns. Environmental justice can serve as a principle of planning and development. The environmental justice movement sometimes acts as a check on the planning and development process to remind us that development has intended and unintended consequences, as well as recognized and unrecognized consequences. In some cases, we fail to anticipate some of the impacts of development. In others, we limit our scope when identifying likely or actual impacts of development, and as a result we fail to recognize some significant consequences. We need to pay attention to these unintended and unrecognized effects. Quite often, we can reduce the costliness of development by identifying and addressing these potential consequences sooner rather than later.

LAND LINES: *What other issues does the Sustainability of Communities project focus on?*

CARLA ROBINSON: Our focus is on communities that are threatened by disintegration or displacement due to threats brought on by rapidly increasing land prices that make it difficult for longtime residents, businesses, and community-serving institutions to remain in the affected areas. These threats can also result from economic disinvestment and decline, high rates of home foreclosure, and environmental contamination that adversely affects residents and property values. The disruption, displacement, economic isolation, and environmental degradation experienced by these communities represent costs that often go unaccounted for in assessments of the benefits and costs associated with specific policy interventions and development projects.

Through this project we intend to look at the nature and extent of these costs and to explore ways to incorporate them more

fully into the analysis of development options and outcomes. Also, we want to identify planning processes and public policies that effectively integrate and respond to the perspectives and concerns of community residents and leaders. We are still in the planning stage. During the initial phase of the project we plan to focus on African-American communities in the southeastern United States.

LAND LINES: *What kinds of research topics will the project address?*

CARLA ROBINSON: Our general area of inquiry involves identifying the extent to which the development process serves community interests. We understand that this covers vast territory, particularly since there are so many types of community that can be examined. I mentioned that we will begin with African-American communities in the Southeast.

Our research will explore how it is that so many of these communities continue to face significant unemployment, deteriorating infrastructure, and inadequate public schools, even after the expenditure of thousands and even millions of dollars in public funds intended to increase the tax base or create jobs in the surrounding areas, and in some cases in those very communities. This work will involve examining how the planning and development processes actually play out in some places, as a means for better understanding which community interests do and which do not get addressed by development policies, projects, and outcomes.

LAND LINES: *Do you expect to develop curricula, publications, and other products as part of the Sustainability of Communities project?*

CARLA ROBINSON: Absolutely. We believe that for our work to be effective it needs to influence how planning and development decisions are made, and ultimately to influence the results of those decisions. We expect to produce training materials, reports, and other items that will improve the ability of community residents and leaders to understand how the planning and development processes work and how to participate effectively in those processes.

We also hope to reach out to other audiences, such as planners, elected officials, and developers, so we can help them address the full set of interests present in their areas.

LAND LINES: *How is this project related to other work in the Department of Economic and Community Development?*

CARLA ROBINSON: Last year the department partnered with the Urban Strategies Council, a community building support and advocacy organization located in Oakland, California, to present a conference on the community control of land. Nearly 100 practitioners and neighborhood residents attended that conference. In preparation the department developed three courses on inclusionary housing, community benefits agreements, and community land trusts, which are tools communities can use to influence development. In addition, a new course, called Planning School for Residents, is being developed with the staff of Strategic Action for a Just Economy (SAJE) in Los Angeles. We are exploring the possibility of making these courses available on the Lincoln Web site.

In March 2008 the department published a policy focus report on the effective use of data and information systems for community transformation (*Transforming Community Development with Land Information Systems*). That report features cities that have used detailed parcel data systems to give neighborhood organizations greater access to information about their local real-estate markets, thus enabling them to participate more effectively in community planning processes.

Looking forward, we believe that what we learn from the Sustainability of Communities project will inform the department's efforts to develop a multi-attribute assessment tool for the likely impacts of development. **L**