



Credit: Courtesy of Mayor Muriel Bowser's Office.

Muriel Bowser vaulted to national prominence this year as a leading voice in the coronavirus pandemic and in the movement for racial justice. Bowser was elected mayor of Washington, DC, in 2014 and reelected in 2018. A leading proponent of DC statehood, she serves in a unique capacity, functioning as a governor and county executive as well as mayor. Since taking office, Bowser has sought to speed up affordable housing production in the District, which is home to 706,000 people across 68 square miles and has a budget of \$16 billion. She has also worked to diversify the local economy, increase satisfaction in city services, and invest in programs and policies that support families. Born and raised in DC, Bowser entered politics in 2004 as an Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner in the Riggs Park neighborhood, then became Ward 4 Councilmember in 2007. Recently, she took time out from her duties as mayor of the nation's capital to connect via email with Lincoln Institute Senior Fellow Anthony Flint.

A Capital Reckoning

ANTHONY FLINT: You came into office in early 2015. Was there anything that could have prepared you for 2020, and how do you see the rest of this tumultuous year playing out? Are you confident about the management of the coronavirus?

MURIEL BOWSER: As a global city, we are constantly preparing for a wide range of shocks and stresses. However, this is clearly an unprecedented event that has required an unprecedented response. Our residents and businesses have made tremendous sacrifices for the health and safety of our community. As a District, we are fortunate that we went into this crisis strong. That enabled us to immediately begin putting in place a number of resources to protect and support residents, from delivering meals to seniors, to creating free grocery distribution sites for anyone in need, to setting up free testing sites across the city and quickly hiring hundreds of contact tracers. Since the beginning of this emergency, we have been very focused on following the science, listening to the experts, and keeping our community informed. I expect that to continue until we get to the other side of this. Overall, though, I am very proud of how Washingtonians have responded to this challenge.

AF: What did the “Black Lives Matter” mural on 16th Street in front of the White House—duplicated in many other cities—tell you about the dynamics of public space and social change?

MB: I decided to create Black Lives Matter Plaza when peaceful protests against systemic racism were met with tear gas, and federal helicopters, and soldiers in camouflage roaming our local streets. And what we did was create a place where Americans could come together for protest and redress, for strategizing and healing. Americans nationwide have taken to the streets to demand change.

Mayor Bowser overlooks the Black Lives Matter mural she commissioned on 16th Street, which leads directly to the White House. Credit: Khalid Naji-Allah.



Whether it's through protest or art, or a combination of protest and art, people are using public space to send a clear message that Black lives matter, that Black humanity matters, and that we need to have this reckoning and fix the broken systems that, for too long, have perpetuated racism and injustice.

AF: In 2019, you set a goal of creating 36,000 new housing units—12,000 of them affordable—by 2025. What are the key things that need to happen to create more housing options in Washington?

MB: When I came into office, we more than doubled our annual investment in DC's Housing Production Trust Fund to \$100 million per year. That's more per capita than any other jurisdiction. And we aren't just investing—we've been getting that money out the door and into projects that are producing and preserving thousands of affordable homes across our city. But we have to do more. As you highlighted, we have a big goal in DC: to build 36,000 new homes by 2025, with at least a third of those units affordable. Last year, we became the first

city in the nation to set affordable housing targets by neighborhood. When we announced those targets, we also hosted community conversations in neighborhoods across DC to discuss with residents the ongoing legacy of redlining and other discriminatory practices and how we can work together to do better. Some of the things we are doing to make this happen are a tax abatement for high-need areas, changes to our inclusionary zoning program, and continuing those big—and strategic—investments in our Housing Production Trust Fund.

AF: If the city's economy recovers from the pandemic, Washington is likely to continue its urban renaissance success story. What policies do you have in place to address gentrification and displacement, both residential and commercial?

MB: I know that Washington will bounce back from this pandemic. We are still home to more than 700,000 Washingtonians who are resilient, creative, and focused on helping their neighbors get through this; and knowing that, I know we will come back from this.

Going into the public health emergency, we were already very focused on building a more inclusive city and making sure the benefits of our prosperity were felt by more Washingtonians. This pandemic has only amplified the importance of our equity efforts. And as we move forward with our response and recovery, we are still focused on how we advance our goals around housing, jobs, health care, and more. We're still investing more than \$100 million in affordable housing. We're moving forward with our strategic plan to end homelessness and opening new, more dignified shelters all across our city. Our homeownership programs continue. We're looking across the housing continuum to see how we help more Washingtonians stay and build their futures in DC.

And we are also supporting our small businesses and local entrepreneurs. For example, we recently announced a new equity inclusion strategy that will increase access to development opportunities for organizations that are owned or majority controlled by individuals who are part of a socially disadvantaged population.

AF: What kind of importance do you ascribe to the planning office of your city, and by extension, who is doing a good job in the practice of planning in other cities?

MB: It's critical that we not only plan for the long-term growth of DC, but also make sure our growth reflects the values of an inclusive and vibrant city. My Office of Planning plays a crucial role in advancing our housing goals and helping us build a city that works for Washingtonians of all backgrounds and income levels. Because the planning office can provide policy analysis, long-term thinking, and community outreach, as well as the implementation needs around zoning and land use, I consider them one of our housing agencies. They work alongside the traditional housing department, public housing authority, and housing finance agency to address housing and affordability.

In terms of other cities, what's interesting is that across the country, there are so many fantastic things happening at the local level, and cities and towns are building innovative solutions to match their unique needs, from Los Angeles to Gary, Indiana, to Boston. Cities are incubators for innovation, and while we don't always have the same challenges—for example, some cities have a lot of people and not enough housing, others have a lot of housing and not enough people—we are constantly learning from each other.

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AF: What can cities do now to address the climate crisis, which grinds on, though eclipsed by the other emergencies that have been more front and center?

MB: Environmental justice must be part of the larger conversation we are having as a nation right now. We know, for example, that the harm caused by manmade climate change disproportionately affects communities of color. Additionally, when we look at the disproportionate impact that COVID-19 is having on Black Americans, that is directly tied to the work we must do to build healthier and more resilient communities. This is all a conversation about equity and justice. In DC, we have a number of programs, like Solar for All, that are focused on fighting climate change while also addressing inequality and other disparities. We don't have to silo these issues; we can and we must focus on all of it. □