

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK
THE UNIVERSITY SENATE

SENATE HOUSING COMMITTEE, ANNUAL REPORT 2016

1. The Senate Housing Committee has mainly concerned itself this year with two issues, the Housing Mobility Program (HMP) and the planned rent increases for 2016 and coming years. It should also be noted that the committee has suffered from poor attendance by its student members and turnover in student membership in the course of the year. See the last paragraph below for a suggested change in the composition of the committee.

2. The Provost attended two meetings of the committee to outline the Housing Mobility Program, which is intended to incentivize faculty who no longer need 'family-sized' apartments to downsize or to move out of university housing. At its December meeting the committee passed the following motion:

"The Committee endorses the Provost's Housing Mobility Program, with two strong provisos, (a) that all who plan to take advantage of it be advised to take independent financial advice before doing so, and (b), since it is evident that this plan alone will not meet the university's need for family-sized apartments over the next seven years, that the university should urgently plan to convert, construct and/or buy the apartments that it will need."

Carrie Marlin (Associate Provost for Administration & Planning), for the administration, noted that the plan document contained a recommendation along the lines of proviso (a). At the committee's February meeting the Provost reported that there had so far been 17 applications by tenants who wished to take advantage of the program. Our latest information (5/19/16) is that there have been 44 applications to date, resulting in four written agreements, with seven more expected in the coming weeks. We must allow time to form a judgment about the success of the program, but while it seems to be having the desired effect it may be doubted that the positive result achieved so far can be repeated year after year or even next year.

3. Members of the committee do not believe, however, that the HMP is going to meet the need for faculty and administration housing over the next approximately six years before there will be any Manhattanville housing, which may in fact bring little if any relief. A large increase in the Engineering faculty is projected and if the coming decade is like the last decade there will be a rapid expansion of officers of administration and some significant increase in the Arts and Sciences faculty, not to mention likely increases in the professional schools. The Provost himself expects there to be a shortfall of 20 to 30 apartments a year.

4. The committee therefore very strongly recommends that the university should re-consider its unwillingness to build, purchase or convert extra faculty/administration housing, concentrating on the 'family-sized' units that seem to be in the shortest supply. The Provost has told the committee that the university has not rejected the possibility of buying buildings, and we want the university to move in that direction without delay, unless it prefers to build or convert. It has also been suggested that the university should move ahead with the housing construction on the Manhattanville site without waiting for the time when it will be legally obligated to do so.

5. A representative of the Work/Life office suggested to the committee that the housing crunch would be eased if more faculty members moved away from Morningside Heights. The committee vigorously opposes that notion, the older members recalling the bad old days a generation ago when many more faculty lived in the suburbs and the university was in consequence far less vibrant than it is today.

6. The committee has repeatedly discussed the current administration policy of raising rents faster than the increases in the CPI (currently 0.6 per cent in New York City), with yet another across the board increase (3 per cent) projected for this year. The committee has been aided by a detailed presentation of the university's housing income, debt and operating costs provided by James Wang. Questions have included the equity involved in keeping rents within bounds at a time of steeply rising open-market housing, the ability of the Arts & Sciences and other divisions to attract and retain faculty in a period when Manhattan housing is becoming more expensive, and the wisdom (or otherwise) of steadily reducing the university's housing debt by means of rent increases. The committee has also noted the benefit resulting from sharply lower fuel costs.

The committee deplores the administration's continuing habit of suggesting (in one case by means of a deceptive graphic) that the rapid growth of NYC housing prices somehow justifies increases in Columbia rents. If anything it does the opposite, i.e. it dictates that Columbia rents must be reasonable, since faculty members and others can less and less afford to live anywhere else. After five continuous years of driving down the UAH debt by means of rent increases, the debt level in real-dollar terms is lower than it was in FY 2000 or any subsequent year, and the cost of debt service in FY 2016 will have been lower (in real-dollar terms once again) than in any year since FY 2003. We suggest that there should now be at least a moratorium on 3 per cent rent increases.

7. Particularly intense complaints about rising rents have been received from postdoctoral fellows and from a representative of the library staff, both of them constituencies vital to the university's well-being.

8. Some retirees have concluded that the university is raising their rents with the intent of driving them out of university housing, thereby in many cases breaking an implicit understanding. The HMP is a much better idea.

9. Meetings formal and informal with graduate students in the Arts & Sciences strongly suggest that the group as a whole is deeply discontented with the quality of university housing, and that this is now a serious obstacle in the way of recruiting the best students. This is a matter which the committee should actively investigate next year.

10. It should by now be plain that the membership of the committee does not adequately reflect the population that lives in university housing. This should be changed, even if trustee action is required. In particular, it is very important that the committee should have a properly chosen full member (not an observer) to represent retired and survivor tenants. Student members of the committee should be appointed from the GS and graduate student bodies (one each) and only from among students who are willing to commit to attending meetings regularly for the whole academic year.

Respectfully submitted,
William V. Harris,
Committee Chair

May 31, 2016

Michael J. Bell (Ten.)
Jeff Gordon (Ten.)
Pablo Piccato (Ten.)
William Duggan (Nonten.)
Austin Long (Nonten.)
Daniella Urbina (Stu.)
Sarthak Kalani (Stu.)
Michael E. Stokes (Res. Officer)
Troy Eggers (Admin.)
James Wang (Admin.)

