

By Bob Eleff

**M**ANY FAMILIES WITH LOW AND MODERATE incomes confronted the nightmare of homelessness rather than the dream of homeownership in the '80s, as housing prices and rent levels galloped far ahead of incomes.

The good news is that after the Reagan administration slashed the budget at the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) from \$30.9 billion to \$7.5 billion.

## BUDGET

President George Bush is resolutely holding steady at those shrunken levels. But that's as kind and gentle as Bush's housing policy is likely to get, as revealed by his proposed 1991 budget.

The conditions this budget claims to address are grim:

- Two earners working full time at the minimum wage cannot afford to rent a two-bedroom apartment at HUD's "fair market rate" in any state of the nation. Those rent levels also exceed the full amount of grants provided by Aid to Families with Dependent Children in 42 states.

- About 170,000 families are on the waiting list for public housing in New York City, 60,000 in Chicago, 17,000 in Washington, 15,000 in San Antonio. Lists are closed in some two-thirds of the 27 major cities surveyed by the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

- One out of five renters—totaling 6.1 million households—paid more than 50 percent of his or her income for housing in 1985.

- Between 1974 and 1985, the number of apartments renting for less than \$300 a month declined by 4.5 million units.

- Requests for emergency shelter by the homeless increased by an average of 25 percent in 1989 in the major cities surveyed by the Conference of Mayors.

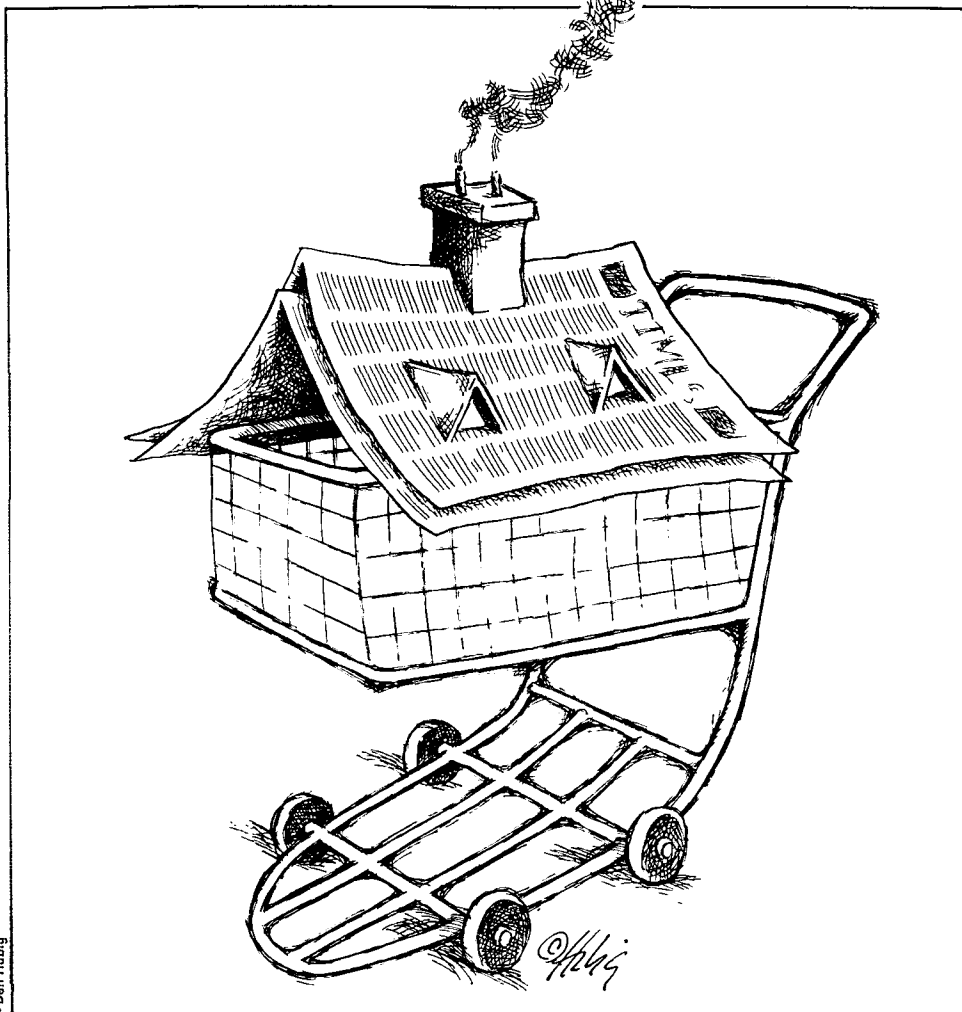
To meet these problems, the Bush administration proposes to spend \$13.6 billion in fiscal year 1991, a significant increase over this year's \$9 billion. But there's less to the Bush agenda than meets the eye.

"The administration proclaims \$5 billion in new spending," says Donald Campbell, a staff director of the Senate banking and housing committee, "but once you begin to peel away the feathers, there's not a lot of bird there."

The largest piece of budgetary fluff is the inclusion of \$7.7 billion for a five-year extension of rent-subsidy contracts that are about to expire. Such renewals have never previously been included in budget requests; Congress does not consider them to be incremental funding. Campbell says that when the smoke and mirrors are removed, the 1991 budget shows a cut of \$520 million in real terms compared with last year's.

As a result, the number of additional families receiving housing assistance will continue to fall. During the Carter administration, an average of 324,000 families were added to the housing-assistance rolls annually. The number declined to 161,000 in Ronald Reagan's first term; Bush is proposing 123,000 for 1991.

These figures do not begin to match the need. The Conference of Mayors reported that fewer than 30 percent of eligible low-income households receive any form of government housing aid.



## Proposed housing plan commits few resources

One could argue that a nation spending \$90 billion a year to subsidize housing should not suffer from such conditions. But in the U.S., five out of six of those subsidy dollars go to relatively affluent homeowners who take advantage of provisions in the tax code that allow the deduction of mortgage interest and property taxes, the deferral of capital gains from housing sales and other tax breaks. Families earning more than \$50,000 a year receive more than half of this bounty—about \$40 billion.

**Faith, HOPE and charity:** HUD Secretary Jack Kemp's undiminished enthusiasm for supply-side economics stops well short of advocating direct increases in the supply of public housing. One indirect attempt to convince the private sector to build more affordable housing is the creation of 50 Housing Opportunity Zones, in which cities would remove such barriers to construction as restrictive zoning and building codes as well as regressive property taxes and rent controls.

Fewer than 4,000 units are expected to be added in 1991—and only for the elderly and handicapped.

The solution Bush holds out to those in need of affordable housing is HOPE, or Homeownership and Opportunity for People Everywhere. The budget's major initiative, it envisions little more than the privatization of the current public-housing stock.

The plan would provide tenants in public housing with \$240 million to enable them to purchase and renovate their projects. Publicly owned properties that are financially distressed or vacant would also go on the selling block. Vouchers would be made available to help pay operating costs for five years.

Low-income housing advocates say HOPE skirts the real problem facing the poor. Campbell likens the program to a disaster at sea with 2,000 passengers floundering in the water and room for only 500 people in lifeboats.

"We don't have anything against homeownership," says Rich West, communications director of the Low Income Housing Information Service, "but the narrow emphasis on it is insidious. It's not just the centerpiece of Bush's program; it's the whole shooting match."

West alleges that the plan is impractical. "No-interest loans were not advanced as part of the plan. At today's interest rates, even a small \$30,000 mortgage will cost \$300 a month. We need more affordable units at below \$250 a month. People earning the minimum wage can't even cover operating costs."

Research done last year by the Low Income Housing Preservation Committee found that 70 percent of the tenants in public housing lived on incomes below \$14,000, half the U.S. median.

**Vanishing resources:** While the administration relies heavily on the existing affordable housing stock for its programs, that resource is also at risk. More than 200,000 units could be lost by 1994, and an additional 160,000 units by 2004.

The problem stems from incentives Washington gave to private developers in the '60s to insure the availability of units for low-income tenants. In addition to mortgage insurance and interest-rate subsidies, developers were promised the option of "pre-paying"—paying off—their mortgages after 20 years. If they pre-pay, they can raise rents to market-rate levels or convert the units to condominiums.

The HUD budget would provide about \$60,000 per unit to tenant groups wishing to purchase these buildings. Alternatively, greater incentives would be made available to owners to dissuade them from pre-paying. If all else fails, HUD promises to protect residents with larger housing vouchers to enable them to pay higher rents.

That latter assurance is not enough, says Larry Yates, director of the Anti-Displacement Project at the Low Income Housing Information Service.

"Owners have said, 'We guarantee all current tenants can stay as long as they want,' but when they leave, the owner is free to raise the rents to market rate," he says. "You lose the massive federal investment that has been made in those buildings for the future. They would be permanently removed from the low-income housing supply."

In the Bush plan, the hallmark of the Reagan housing program, five-year housing vouchers issued to tenants to supplement their incomes would continue. Critics argue that these vouchers—substituted for 15-year certificates that were tied to specific properties—are of little help to tenants because there is a shortage of affordable housing from which to choose.

A study for HUD done by Abt Associates found that only 61 percent of tenants nationwide who were issued vouchers were able to find housing in which to use them, although about one-third of those tenants simply used the vouchers in their current units.

"We don't know why the success rates aren't much closer to 90 percent," says Stephen Kennedy, who directed the study.

Low-income housing shortages are hard to prove because data on vacancy rates is not available by rent level, Kennedy says. But the Abt study did show that in such tight housing markets as New York and Boston, success rates dropped to well below 50 percent.

Critics of vouchers also say they give developers no incentives to increase the supply of affordable housing. In testimony last spring before the House Subcommittee on Housing and Urban Affairs, Abe Biderman, commissioner of New York City's Department of Housing Preservation and Development, said that vouchers should be project-based and should be issued for more than five years.

"A project-based certificate can then induce a developer to build a unit knowing that he will have a reliable income flow for a long period of time. He will not build a unit on the anticipation that somebody may or may not come in with a voucher," he says.

The philosophy underlying the Bush housing plan is similar to that of the Reagan administration: there is no need for an explicit housing or urban policy. It is simply assumed that unleashing the forces of the market—removing regulatory restraints (Housing Opportunity Zones) and raising the purchasing power of the poor to enable them to subsidize existing market alternatives (HOPE and vouchers)—will produce improvements.

Housing advocates, however, say that ideology is no substitute for resources. "The programs are simply underfunded," West says. "It's the classic problem of the Bush administration: good intentions but no backbone."

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**T**HE PAUCITY OF DARK FACES IN MOST OF THE crowds celebrating Earth Day on April 22 provided further evidence that the green movement in this country is too white. Despite the fact that racial minorities are the chief victims of environmental pollution, few are involved in the organized struggle to clean it up. And while few dispute the ecology movement's racial isolation, there is considerable disagreement about an explanation for it.

A coalition of civil-rights groups blames racism. In a letter circulated last January, the coalition accused eight major environmental groups—the Wilderness Society, the Sierra Club, the National Audubon Society, the Environmental Defense Fund, Friends of

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the Earth, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the National Parks and Conservation Association and the Izaak Walton League—of racist hiring practices. Although they demanded the environmental groups take steps within 60 days to assure that 30 to 40 percent of their staffs are members of minority groups, the deadline passed without an official response.

But that doesn't mean the accused environmental groups are insensitive to the charges. Spokesmen for the organizations conceded they had poor records of hiring and promoting minority employees, but they denied racist motives. Instead, they attributed the movement's racial exclusivity to the scarcity of minorities in the pool of environmental specialists. And, they added, those rare blacks and Hispanics with the requisite training have not been attracted to the meager salaries offered by their non-profit groups.

**The great divide:** Aside from those disparate interpretations on the role of green racism, there is a wall of distrust between the black community and the predominantly white environmental movement. And some of that distrust is well earned.

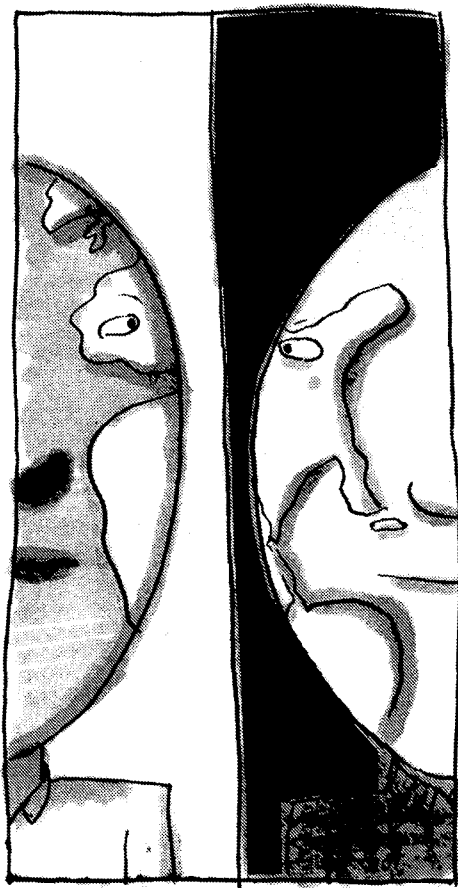
"It's a legacy of the early '70s," Mike McCloskey, chairman of the Sierra Club, is quoted as saying in the April edition of the *New Age Journal*. "There was a lot of competition over what should be the most pressing concerns in American society. We kept trying to argue that the black community ought to be interested in the environment. And they kept saying, 'OK, you've got some valid interests; but ours are more weighty.' We kept going around in circles and gave up."

The incident often cited to demonstrate the lack of communication between racial minorities and white environmentalists occurred at San Jose City College during the first Earth Day celebration in 1970: white organizers bought a new Cadillac and then buried it to dramatize the harmful effects on the environment. The Black Student Union demonstrated in protest, arguing that the money wasted on that car would have been better spent on the problems of the inner cities.

Additionally, there are differing motives at work; most of the established groups—such as the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society—started life as protectors of the wilderness and nature enthusiasts, so it shouldn't be surprising that they have little in common with those whose primary concerns are the inner cities' economic and public-health issues.

There's also no mystery about why black

# U.S. green movement needs to be colorized



organizations had trouble shifting their priorities from immediate survival issues to those of a more abstract, provisional nature. Only recently has science been able to irrefutably link environmental toxins to definite health effects.

Although that realization has not fully penetrated the black community, environmental pollution is gaining attention from black leaders, and for good reason. In the workplace, black employees continue to be concentrated in the low-paying, high-risk, blue-collar occupations that tend to have health-threatening environments. And in their communities, inadequate low-income housing and residential segregation concentrate black and Hispanic populations in areas where risks from industrial lead and auto pollution are often extreme. Consequently, racial minorities are disproportionately victimized by environmental health hazards.

For instance, between 1976 and 1980 more than 50 percent of all black infants tested for lead contamination had blood levels higher than the U.S. Centers for Disease Control's standards. Additionally, a study by the National Center for Health Statistics found that black people, particularly urban boys, are nearly three times more likely to die of asthma than are whites.

**Targeted toxins:** According to a 1987 study conducted by the United Church of

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Christ's Commission for Racial Justice, race was the most significant of several variables in determining the location of commercial hazardous-waste sites in residential areas—even more significant than socioeconomic status. The study found that the three sites accounting for more than 40 percent of the nation's total capacity for commercial hazardous-waste disposal are located in predominantly African-American or Hispanic communities. The study also revealed the following:

- The nation's largest hazardous-waste landfill, which receives toxic materials from 45 states and several foreign countries, is located in Sumter County, Ala., a predominantly African-American community in the heart of the state's "black belt";

- The predominantly African-American and Hispanic Southeast Side of Chicago has the greatest concentration of hazardous-waste sites in the nation; and

- Puerto Rico is one of the most heavily polluted places in the world.

The manifest discrimination evident in the placement of toxic-waste facilities has energized the civil-rights community around issues long considered outside their ken. Organized protests against what has been termed "environmental racism" are increasing throughout the country, and the issue has forged growing cooperation between certain segments of the environmental movement and grass-roots organizations in minority communities. In the Chicago area, for instance, members of Greenpeace USA have hooked up with residents of the predominantly black suburb of Robbins, Ill., to fight the scheduled construction of a waste incinerator.

**Acknowledging racism:** Greenpeace, which was not one of the environmental groups denounced in the January letter, has long decried the green movement's monochromatic hue and has spearheaded attempts to help it become more colorized. In addition to its stepped-up struggle against toxic wastes, Greenpeace has instituted aggressive membership campaigns designed to attract minority participation. The path-breaking environmental group has also led the charge in forming alliances with other constituencies.

Last month, for example, Greenpeace organized an international demonstration protesting a U.S. chemical company's shipments of poisonous mercury waste to South Africa. Those activities are not only related by ecological logic but are also linked in the cause of Greenpeace's fight against environmental racism. "The practices of dumping American and European toxic wastes in Third World countries is also an issue of racism," explained Greenpeace official Sharon Pines.

Several of the more recently established environmental groups are following Greenpeace's lead in reaching out for minority input and in linking the struggle for a clean environment to economic justice. In recent months the issue of the movement's racial schisms has dominated discussions at environmental conferences and in the journals.

Yet civil-rights organizations continue to show little interest in ecological issues. It's

still rare to find environmental items on the agendas of the major civil-rights groups. At last year's African-American summit in New Orleans, delegates completely omitted environmental issues from their discussions on the survival prospects of the black community.

"To be quite candid about it, we've not been as conscientious as perhaps we should have been," says Norris McDonald, president and founder of the Center for Environment, Commerce and Energy (CECE), a four-year-old black environmental group based in Washington, D.C. "I don't blame anybody for our lack of concern about environmental pollution. It's our fault."

A former member of Friends of the Earth, McDonald says he formed CECE to better educate the black community about the devastating effects of environmental pollution. "I realized there was a cultural barrier between white environmentalists and the black community," McDonald says, "and the stakes were too high to allow any barrier to communication about the dangers of toxic pollution." He believes African-Americans have to begin assuming more responsibility in the fight for a clean environment. "I don't fault the civil-rights groups for focusing on other issues—that's how they saw their mission. But our mission is to bring African-Americans the news that environmental issues are too crucial to ignore."

Thomas Atkins, a black official of Environmental Action, is more pointed in his criticism of the civil-rights movement's ecological activity. "We must make environmental pollution a priority on our social-justice agenda, along with housing, jobs, the military buildup, drugs and illiteracy," he says. "The traditional elite are not going to save me, my people or my community from the polluters. However, I can save myself."

For example, Atkins adds, "the South is a toxic dumping ground, but it is also home to the highest proportion of black elected officials and the bastion of black higher education. I look to all our leaders, whether in the political, academic, media or industrial realm, to inspire us and make environmental concerns a part of our life."

**Tainting the greens:** But some African-American political leaders are not yet ready to join the environmental cause. In Robbins, one of Illinois' poorest municipalities, the city's black elected officials support the waste incinerator for its proposed economic benefits. Robbins' mayor has seized the opportunity to portray Greenpeace as a white elitist group selfishly pursuing its own interest to the detriment of her resource-starved constituents.

According to Pines, who is Greenpeace's Midwest regional executive director, the city's leaders have been duped by the industrial interests pushing the incinerator. "The company that's trying to build the incinerator has been boasting that hundreds of new jobs will be created," she explains. "We've shown how that simply won't be the case, but it's difficult to counter the emotional appeal of that argument."

Pines believes that corporate interests play a large role in aggravating the divisions between the African-American community and the environmental movement. Historically, the affected industries have provided generous donations to civil-rights groups, expecting silence in return. And, generally, they got what they paid for.

These days, however, many African-Americans are beginning to realize that the price of that silence was much too high. □