

Straining in the Stadium's Shadow

Soaring Taxes Put Youth Agency, Others in SE at Risk

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As the District prepares to celebrate the grand opening of a waterfront baseball stadium, Positive Nature is preparing to close two blocks away.

The agency is a daily rest stop, almost a second home, for children, some of whom have been sexually abused, shuffled from one foster home to another or sent to counseling because they fight or act up. The nonprofit group moved into the Southeast Washington neighborhood in 2004 when it was a haven for addicts, prostitutes and nightclubs with nude dancers.

The lease came with a caveat: It had to pay the property taxes.

Taxes were manageable when Positive Nature was next to a methadone clinic and take-out restaurants. But with new neighbors, including a [Marriott](#) hotel, [Starbucks](#) and the [Washington Nationals](#), taxes skyrocketed from \$9,000 in 2005 to \$83,699 last year.

"We thought it was a good move, not recognizing what this place would become," said Brian Bailey, a Positive Nature co-founder. "Maybe we were naive."

Higher tax revenue to pay for schools, roads and subsidized housing is how the District marketed the \$611 million stadium project to reluctant city residents.

To make way, some businesses were bought and leveled. It has been a struggle for those who remain.

One cab company is moving next week because the building it leases has been sold. A deli owner said that rising taxes, now at \$50,000 a year, are eating away at his profits.

At Ann's Beauty Supply and Wigs, Sok "Ann" Reed is trying to rebuild the business she has owned for 27 years. Since 2004, taxes have risen from \$600 to \$16,000.

"Before I get on my feet, the government sucks everything out," Reed said as construction crews hammered away. "It's not fair."

Last year, assessments on [Capitol Hill](#) and in the Navy Yard neighborhood rose an average of 11 percent, but annual increases of 30 to 40 percent have been common in the city for years. The low-slung buildings occupied by Positive Nature and Reed are becoming passé as hotels, condominiums and office buildings rise nearby. The new businesses enter the tax rolls with a high valuation, but existing businesses see their taxes soar to catch up.

"The market is being driven by investors who want to be near the vicinity of the ballpark," said Phillip Appelbaum, the city's acting chief tax assessor. "That is driving up the value. All we are doing is reflecting what the market is telling us."

The streets near the stadium are awash with activity: hammers thudding, big trucks rolling, workers yelling and forklifts beeping as they back up. Older businesses, several of which involve auto mechanic

and body work, are paying the costs of change. Owners say that nobody cares whether they vanish, because they count their profits in the thousands of dollars, and the newcomers count theirs in millions.

Imran Butt, owner of Empire Cab Association, said he pays about \$1,000 a month for electricity and property taxes.

[Andy Lee](#), who owns two buildings at First and L streets, said taxes are killing his business, the Market Deli. One building's taxes have risen from \$1,500 to \$22,000. His total tax bill is \$50,000.

"I work 13, 14 hours a day, and I'm making D.C. government happy," Lee said, as customers streamed in for sandwiches and chicken wings. "Businesses can't stay anymore."

The folks at Positive Nature understand. The program's co-founders have laid off employees (some have remained as volunteers), taken out personal loans and started a fundraising campaign. And they have approached [D.C. Council](#) members with the idea to create a tax exemption that would forgive the taxes on the property.

But there's no assurance that the agency can keep its doors open after this month.

The families who depend on Positive Nature question the city's priorities. In seven years at Positive Nature, Nichelle Payne, 16, has learned to control her temper. She used to get into fistfights, even with her mother. Now, Nichelle shows others who have emotional issues how to exercise control. Adults, she said, can be difficult to understand.

"They say they want to keep people off the streets, from killing each other," she said. "This is going to

put more kids out on the streets. This is going to produce more killing."

Others associated with the program paint a stark picture.

Shannon Hall, a staff lawyer at the Children's Law Center in Washington, said Positive Nature helps prevent many foster children from being placed in a psychiatric institution or out-of-state facility. Some have problems so severe that if Positive Nature closes, they might be taken from their families and put into a hospital setting, she said.

"These children are fragile," said Hall, a former foster child.

Quintonio Ricks, 17, has battled sickle cell anemia and learning disabilities all his life. He got into trouble, stealing cars and staying away from home for days at a time.

"I'd probably be doing something real dumb if I didn't have this program," he said. "I wouldn't have had people to tell me negativity is not the way."

His mother, Barbara Brown, said the city needs more programs that steer children in a positive direction.

"If he can make it to 21, hallelujah," she said of her son. "We are losing our youth."

If Positive Nature must close, co-founder Bailey said, it will try to transition youths to other programs. In the meantime, the agency will hold fundraisers, including a "bucket drive" as the stadium opens this weekend.