

Exchanges get heated at GHA meeting

By Ian White | Posted: Tuesday, October 5, 2010 12:00 am

GALVESTON — Elizabeth Beeton started an argument; Mark Davis implored Galvestonians to stop fighting; Tarris Woods gave a lighthearted history lesson with minor corrections from Barbara Crews; Dolph Tillotson was accused of running the most racist newspaper in the state; and Tom LaRue discovered he and Leon Phillips are brothers.

But with the last statement of an emotionally charged public comments session at the end of Monday's Galveston Housing Authority workshop the board's vice president Paula Neff gained an ovation for declaring: "We're not going to sell this community out."

Before the public was given its head the members of the housing authority board ran the gamut of island public housing issues including a discussion on member LaRue's proposals to alter the number of homes rebuilt on the authority's four Hurricane Ike-destroyed developments.

Included in that discussion was a reference to the possibility of a public-private partnership at the Magnolia Homes site and a land swap involving the Oleander Homes site.

The board also revised its target for the number of homes proposed at the Cedar Terrace site to 66 which is six fewer than the vision outlined by LaRue in Monday's Daily News article "Housing authority to discuss possible land swap."

The revision which if approved would add six homes to the number built on scattered sites was introduced after the authority's executive director Harish Krishnarao described federal rules that require 50 percent of public housing to be rebuilt in low-income areas and the remainder in areas of higher income.

The total number of homes rebuilt would remain at 569 the number the authority is charged with replacing after their destruction by the 2008 storm.

The public comment session began peaceably with Angela Brown speaking up for public-private partnerships and saying: "It's public housing that works."

Crews Historic Downtown Strand Seaport Partnership's vice president said her organization would be "a willing partner" in the Magnolia Homes redevelopment and called for it to be designed "by putting into the mix opening up the streets so it's not a fortress and is walkable and livable."

Tillotson speaking in his capacity as chairman of Galveston Chamber of Commerce's advocacy committee said the authority was moving in the right direction with its proposals to lower the density of public housing something the chamber was calling for a year ago.

Ralph McMorris of the Galveston Association of Island Neighborhoods agreed the authority is "definitely going in the right direction" but said "the devil is in the details."

He drew an immediate response from the board's president Sharon Strain when he read a statement that GAIN does not recognize the conciliation agreement under which the housing authority now has to act.

"I walk on eggshells every day about this because when the Department of Housing and Urban Development moves in and closes a local authority you lose the ability to decide what you do for your community and everything is also delayed for several years" she said.

"We're going to abide by the conciliation agreement. It's not appropriate for GHA to fight it and put 1000 people's homes at risk."

Joe Compian of Gulf Coast Interfaith said there is "a great urgency" for rebuilding the island's lost homes.

Beeton who represents District 3 on Galveston City Council drew several responses after she said: "I sense that the community does not support rebuilding 569 units and that if we had a vote next week the overwhelming majority would vote to give HUD its money back."

Phillips who leads Galveston County Coalition for Justice replied: "What a thought for a city councilwoman to suggest we give the money back to the federal government. We need their help.

"We didn't need a court to tell us we need to rebuild our public housing. We knew that and spent from October 2008 to January this year coming up with a plan.

"We don't want to be like New Orleans and wait five years for our new homes but we haven't hit a nail yet."

Looking at LaRue for effect he said: "We are all human beings. The Bible tells us we began with Adam and Eve. I'm looking at you brother."

LaRue interrupted: "You're not in a position to preach to me."

Phillips replied: "Sorry I'm not trying to preach. I'm saying we all came from two."

Former authority board member Ray Lewis told Beeton: "I'm not so sure the vote would be overwhelming. Galveston does not have a place to tell HUD anything but it does have a chance to show how well we can do things."

David Miller head of the Galveston chapter of the National Association for Advancement of Colored People told the board members: "You don't care otherwise you'd be rebuilding. And Dolph Tillotson runs the most racist newspaper in the state."

Also referring to Tillotson Woods said: "How times have changed. Twenty years ago when Barbara was mayor the housing authority proposed deconcentrating public housing and Dolph fought against it. Now he wants to open it up to the community."

Crews said: "I wasn't mayor. I was a member of the city council."

Davis executive director of Galveston County Food Bank said: "The spirit of this community would be better served than by having this battle.

"Not all people living in poverty are African-American. There is no majority population here. We are all minorities.

"We have to have housing that meets the needs of our poorest residents."

The session ended with comments from three board members.

Addressing Beeton James Dennis said: "There are going to be 569 new homes. The authority doesn't need to debate that any more."

LaRue said: "We are attempting to satisfy as many people as possible on both sides of the argument."

Neff wound up the session saying: "Satisfying everybody is an impossible thought but we will serve our people living in poverty to the best of our ability.

"We're not going to sell this community out."