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Galveston Public Housing Plan Moves Forward

by Audrey White | April 17, 2013 | [1 Comment](#)

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photo by: Audrey White

GALVESTON — The city of Galveston on Wednesday took a major step toward beginning the rebuilding of public housing facilities demolished after Hurricane Ike in 2008.

After months of back-and-forth with the General Land Office over details related to rebuilding 529 public housing units, the Galveston City Council voted to adhere to terms set by the land office. Had the council voted differently or failed to take action, the city would have been at risk of losing at least \$105 million in state and federal disaster recovery funds, City Manager Michael Kovacs said. The

housing plan still needs approval from the Galveston Housing Authority board to move forward.

Most of the council members who were elected in 2012, including Mayor Lewis Rosen, ran on promises to fight the rebuilding of public housing in Galveston, saying they wanted to reduce crime and avoid a concentration of public housing on the island. In an [op-ed in the Galveston Daily News on Sunday](#), Rosen said the housing plan is flawed but because “the GLO will not negotiate,” the city would have to accept the land office’s terms to avoid possible bankruptcy.

“We all fought very hard to live up to our campaign promises,” Rosen said Wednesday. The resolution “is a real positive thing for the city. Now we can move forward with fixing our city.”

The city demolished public housing sites that were damaged by Ike, with promises to rebuild public housing units in the city. Forty out of the 569 demolished units have been rebuilt. The public housing

program has changed hands, and Galveston has changed leadership multiple times since the storm.

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“Ike presented an opportunity to tear down and start over. Once it’s down, it’s down, and it’s become a struggle to get them back up,” said Leon Phillips of the Galveston County Coalition for Justice, which advocates for the public housing. During four years of recovery efforts, “the wealthy have been made whole, while the poor are still sitting here.”

On April 10, the General Land Office put recovery funds on hold for projects like road reconstruction and water and sewer infrastructure until the city addressed its concerns about contingency language in a Sept. 28 City Council resolution specifying how the GLO releases funds for mixed-income housing — housing facilities that include public housing units as well as market-rate units available to the general public.

“In 2008, Galveston had the option to accept the federal money or not accept the federal money with all strings attached,” Land Commissioner [Jerry Patterson](#) wrote in [an op-ed April 10](#). “Today, the simple fact is that if Galveston does not follow through with its commitments after having accepted the federal money, Galveston could jeopardize the entire \$3.2 billion program statewide.”

The council voted 5-2 Wednesday to remove the contingency that drew the land office’s objection. Norman Pappous and Elizabeth Beeton, who voted against it, said the housing plan violates federal fair housing law.

The GLO also asked the city to address other concerns, including the appointment of a local coordinator for [Section 3](#), a HUD job growth program. The housing plan will now go before the Galveston Housing Authority board, which will have a special meeting Tuesday to consider the matter.

Housing authority chairman Buddy Herz, who was appointed by Rosen, said he believes housing vouchers are a more effective way to reduce the concentration of poverty in a city like Galveston. But he said the land office and HUD are requiring the mixed-income housing and scattered sites instead. He said there was no opportunity to negotiate the terms that are based in part on a 2010 [conciliation agreement](#) to which neither the city nor the housing authority were parties.

People in the city who oppose public housing may do so because they fear an increase in crime, Herz said.

“When you’re fighting for survival, everyone should fight together,” Herz said. “But there is the fear that crime and dope in [public housing] would spread to neighborhoods.”

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The housing authority board still has questions about the terms of the housing plans, which vice

chairman Tony Brown sent to the land office in an email Tuesday. Jim Suydam, spokesman for the land office, said the housing authority board will receive responses to its questions before it meets Tuesday.

“These are things that can be worked through,” he said.

If the housing authority board votes Tuesday to approve the plan, the process of rebuilding could begin after a stretch of delays.

That’s good news for people like Peggy Paul, a Galveston ISD employee living in Hitchcock because she can’t find affordable housing on the island.

“I need to come home. We need the housing here,” Paul said. "The city is playing politics with my life."

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