

Despite advocate complaints, council approves final Ike recovery projects

By JOHN WAYNE FERGUSON The Daily News | Posted: Friday, November 20, 2015 12:00 am

GALVESTON

The city has officially declared how it intends to spend the last of a major portion of the recovery money given to the city after Hurricane Ike.

The city council on Thursday voted 6-1 to approve allocating \$38.5 million in Community Development Block Grant money to nine projects.

The money will be to use to demolish the city's Fire Station No. 1 and build a new station across the street from city hall; to rebuild a wastewater treatment plant near Scholes International Airport; to rehabilitate water tanks on 30th Street and 59th Street; to add a brand new elevated water tank at 59th Street and to restore and beautify the area around the new Cedars at Carver Park mixed-income housing development.

The money represents the last of the \$212 million the city received from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development to repair city infrastructure damaged or destroyed by Hurricane Ike in 2008.

Mayor Jim Yarbrough said the funding was meant to go to the areas of a town that "need it the most."

Thursday's vote came over the objections of some low-income advocacy groups that had asked to delay voting on the projects.

On Thursday morning, Texas Appleseed and the Texas Low Income Housing Information Service, sent a letter to Yarbrough, claiming the proposed projects may not meet the city's obligations to serve low-income residents.

"As described in the public materials, many of the projects ... appear unrelated to helping these neighborhoods recover and redress the impacts of historical segregation and neglect," wrote John Henneberger and Madison Sloan, the directors of the two Austin-based nonprofits. "This is troubling given the city's explicit commitment to addressing infrastructure needs on the Northside, the focus of previous CDBG-DR infrastructure spending on higher income neighborhoods and 'citywide projects,' and the commitment to comply with fair housing and civil rights laws that determines the city's eligibility for CDBG-DR funds."

Henneberger and Sloan said that the city should not approve the project until a review was done to

make sure they serve low-income minority neighborhoods.

The city received a similar request from a coalition of local groups, including the local chapter of the NAACP, on Wednesday.

Mary Patrick, the president of the local chapter of the NAACP, said the coalition had met with Yarbrough about potential projects, and had no specific objections to the proposed plans; but had wanted a chance to review the final proposal before it was approved.

“There was no discussion on the projects at all with us,” Patrick said. “We just wanted to a chance to have some input on what was going to happen.”

She declined to say if the group would have further reaction to the council’s vote.

The objections of the low-income groups is significant, because they are the same groups that opposed the city’s plan for replacing public housing torn down after Hurricane Ike and secured the 2010 conciliation agreement with the housing department that requires the city perform a “one-for-one replacement” of every public housing unit that was destroyed.

During the meeting, Yarbrough said that 77 percent of the projects under the city’s approved plan explicitly serve low-and-middle income neighborhoods.

City officials also said the plans met the approval of the Texas General Land Office, which is responsible for approving the city’s spending of disaster funds.

“I’m hesitant to delay because I don’t think things will materially change,” Yarbrough said. “I haven’t heard any new ideas on the topic in a number of months.”

It’s possible that more projects could be named as engineering costs and other factors are determined, officials said. But, for now, the named projects are what the city is committed to doing.

District 2 councilman Craig Brown was the lone vote against allocating the money. Brown said he wanted the advocates to have more input on the plans before the council voted.