

GLO keeps tight hold on public housing site study

By MICHAEL A. SMITH | Posted: Sunday, August 10, 2014 12:04 am

GALVESTON — The Texas General Land Office in mid-July received a study that will largely define how and where more than 300 public housing units will be built on sites scattered around the island.

The report, which focuses on the most controversial aspect of a larger plan that induced profound controversy on the island for more than five years, arrived without fanfare, and the land office will work to keep it from public view.

That tight hold on the information is causing consternation among some who've been deeply involved in replacing 569 public housing units demolished after being flooded by Hurricane Ike in 2008. And for some, the report stands as a telling example of how, in an effort to block the rebuilding, civic leaders abdicated both responsibility for and control over a project that could affect every neighborhood in Galveston.

Request filed

The Daily News on Tuesday filed a Texas Public Information Act request for the report, which was paid for with a \$500,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The land office would seek to withhold it, however, under a provision in the act exempting from disclosure documents related to potential real estate transactions, Jim Suydam, press secretary to Land Commissioner Jerry Patterson, said. Disclosing the report could harm taxpayers by tipping off potential sellers to inflate land prices, he said.

The land office in March awarded WFN Consulting of Marietta, Ga., a \$420,000 contract to determine general areas appropriate for the scattered-site public housing units, Suydam said. The consultants reviewed neighborhood census data and assessed such things as the quality of infrastructure and availability of health care and transportation, he said.

The report also was supposed to include a study about “revitalization of the North Broadway neighborhood” and “adjacent low income minority neighborhoods,” according to a resolution approved by the Galveston City Council in September 2012 after long and often heated negotiation with the land office and HUD.

It was unclear last week how deeply the report delved into revitalization issues, however.

Aside from assessing potential public housing sites, the report would help make suggestions about how the city could coordinate building infrastructure with rebuilding public housing, Suydam said.

Seeking details

What was clear last week, however, was that people and groups involved in the long, contentious rebuilding effort were keen for details about the report and that some were feeling shut out of the process.

Texas Low Income Housing Information Services, which was instrumental in Galveston receiving hundreds of millions in federal disaster recovery dollars, sought to have input in, and to learn details about, the consultant's work, but wasn't able to, John Henneberger, the group's co-executive director, said.

"We asked to meet with the consultants but were not allowed to," he said. "The GLO handled this process completely internally."

The group finally gave up and moved on to other projects, Henneberger said.

Steven McIntyre, an attorney and member of nonprofit Gulf Coast Interfaith, who has been among the main local advocates in the rebuilding effort, said he was able to arrange a meeting with the firm and the land office.

"A few of us in town met with them a few weeks ago," he said. "I asked for the meeting and encouraged them to talk to folks north of Broadway and not just to the Chamber of Commerce and people in the government, but people who live and used to live there."

The consultants listened but didn't probe for any input from the local delegation, McIntyre said.

He said he had been unable to learn any details about what the consultant's report recommended.

Surprised

Mayor Jim Yarbrough said he met with land office officials shortly before taking office in May and left that meeting under the impression that the consultants would be in touch; that never happened. He said he was surprised to learn Wednesday that the consultants had filed a report.

Yarbrough said he intended to contact the land office looking for details about what the consultant recommended.

"There still may be an opportunity to influence the scattered-site part of the plan," he said.

Interim City Manager Brian Maxwell and other staff members met with the consultants to talk about development along Broadway near mixed-income projects that also are part of the public housing rebuilding effort, spokeswoman Elizabeth Rogers said. The scattered-site public housing units were not part of that discussion, she said.

Not surprised

Former Galveston Housing Authority Board Chairwoman Betty Massey said it wasn't surprising to her that the report appeared to have been done without much local input. The authority under Massey had supported rebuilding public housing, but opposed doing so with a large number of scattered-site units. That board instead favored building mixed-income developments like those planned on the sites of the demolished Cedar Terrace and Magnolia Homes projects. Henneberger's group had favored scattered sites.

Local leaders lost control of the process after the 2012 city council election in which a bloc opposed to rebuilding public housing at all was swept into office, and Massey and her pro-rebuilding colleagues on the authority board were ousted, Massey said. In September 2012, the housing authority struck a deal under which the land office would find a nonprofit developer to build and operate as many as 388 scattered-site public housing units.

The local housing authority now has no role in the scattered-site part of the rebuilding. That same month, the city council agreed to surrender the \$500,000 HUD community redevelopment planning grant to the land office. That money was used to pay for the report filed in mid-July.

"They not only ceded our responsibility to provide low-income housing, they abdicated any local control over the biggest part of it," Massey said. "It was one of the dumbest things ever done in Galveston."

The land office last week was drafting a request for proposals for nonprofit developers qualified to run the scattered-site effort, Suydam said. Officials hoped to make a selection by the end of September and have the planning work commence by January, he said.

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