

Housing advocate with Galveston ties named MacArthur genius

By JOHN WAYNE FERGUSON | Posted: Wednesday, September 17, 2014 11:05 pm

GALVESTON — A housing advocate who has played a crucial role in the rebuilding of low- and middle-income housing in Texas after Hurricane Ike has been named a MacArthur Foundation Fellow.

John Henneberger, co-director of the Texas Low Income Housing Information Service, was one of 21 people announced as fellows on Wednesday.

Commonly referred to as MacArthur “geniuses,” fellows are recognized for their “extraordinary originality and dedication in their creative pursuits,” according to the foundation.

Henneberger didn’t respond to an interview request, but in a blog post on his own organization’s website, he wrote he was “deeply honored” by the award.

Henneberger, 59, was recognized for a career of nearly 40 years as an advocate for fair and affordable housing.

Through the Texas Low Income Housing Information Service, Henneberger has “created a new paradigm of post-disaster rebuilding” the MacArthur Foundation said in a news release announcing the award.

“This recognition comes to me in large part because of my association with an extraordinary group of colleagues and associates and the importance of the issues we work on together,” Henneberger wrote. “Together, we work for decent, affordable homes, fair housing and neighborhood equality. We believe these things must be realized both as a matter of justice and in order to solve our country’s most important social and economic problems.”

In its announcement, the MacArthur Foundation specifically cited the conciliation agreement signed in 2010 between his Henneberger’s organization and the state of Texas meant to guarantee disaster recovery money awarded after hurricanes Dolly and Ike went to poor communities most affected by the storms.

The agreement is familiar to Galvestonians who have been following the rebuilding of public housing



Genius Grants

Housing advocate John Henneberger was named as one of 21 people to receive a “genius grant” from the Chicago-based MacArthur Foundation.

since 2010, because of a single line contained in the 25-page document.

The document says that “no less than \$50 million shall be available for use by the city of Galveston to the one-for-one replacement of all family and elderly public housing units damaged or destroyed in Hurricane Ike.”

While in subsequent news interviews Henneberger has said that line was not the main point of the agreement, it became a flashpoint in local debates about rebuilding. For proponents of public housing, it was seen as a guarantee of future housing for Galveston’s poorest residents. For opponents, the agreement has been referred to an example of undue influence by a special interest group

What’s undeniable is that the conciliation agreement brought tens of millions of dollars in recovery money to the region.

“The agreement transformed the way that Texas and its local governments address affordable housing, community development and fair housing,” the foundation wrote.

Local community leaders said that Henneberger’s award was well deserved.

Joe Compian, a board member for Gulf Coast Interfaith, said Henneberger’s efforts have had a definite effect on the city of Galveston, particularly in helping to organize community groups as decisions were being made on how to spend money.

As public meetings were being held, Galveston’s poor community found a voice, Compian said.

“For the first time, we had people actually showing up,” Compian said. “We were guided in systems and challenges that had happened with past disasters.”

The MacArthur Foundation also credited Henneberger with his role in creating new forms of permanent, affordable housing that could be constructed in matters of weeks instead of months.

MacArthur fellows are nominated and selected in secret. The fellowship comes with a \$625,000 cash reward.

Henneberger wrote that throughout his five-year fellowship he would pursue and support a number of initiatives, including leading fair housing and neighborhood rights campaigns, ensuring that housing reconstruction affirmatively furthers fair housing, developing a post-disaster housing rebuilding model, securing decent living conditions for people living in Texas border colonias, and organizing a new affordable housing movement in Austin.