

What to make of scattered sites

By **HEBER TAYLOR** | Posted: Thursday, January 26, 2017 10:15 pm

After Hurricane Ike, Galveston tied itself in knots on what to do about the public housing units destroyed in the storm. The debate was pointless and destructive. But it certainly made a difference in Galveston's history. Largely as a result of that debate, a new mayor and council were elected. Voters were up in arms.

Many prophesied doom over the mixed-income housing developments that were at the heart of the plan to replace the public housing wrecked by the storm. The developments envisioned a mix of market-rate units and subsidized units. Critics were certain that no one would rent the market-rate units, and the developments would deteriorate from the start. In fact, those units have been filling up as soon they are finished.

Not all the 569 public-housing units destroyed by the storm could be replaced by subsidized units in mixed-income developments. And so the agreement to rebuild housing available to low-income families — known as the conciliation agreement — called for some units to be built on scattered sites.

Some critics prophesied that those units would never be built. Actually, construction should begin in April.

There are 97 vouchers for the scattered-site housing. Four developers have been buying properties that qualify. They'll build the housing and rent to qualified tenants. The funding for vouchers is good for 15 years. And if Congress appropriates more money into the program it could be extended another 15 years.

Initially, about 160 sites were proposed. But rules for the sites are extensive. You can't, for example, build scattered-site housing in minority neighborhoods. You can't build them next door to each other. Of the initial sites, more than 60 qualified, meaning developers have been looking at other properties.

But construction on the first units should begin in a few months.

What should Galvestonians do?

First, they should forget about tying themselves in knots again. If you're invited to a revival of that argument, just say no.

Second, keep in mind that, after the storm, Galveston accepted a couple of hundred million dollars in federal money to rebuild infrastructure with the promise that it would replace housing for low-income families. Galveston got hundreds of millions, rather than tens of millions, because so many low-income residents lived on the island. Trying to weasel out of that deal, or cut corners, is just wrong.

Third, the scattered sites are not the end of it. Even after the 97 scattered sites are built, Galveston will still be short about 190 units complying with the conciliation agreement.

In 2017, Galveston will mark the ninth anniversary of the storm, and Galveston still has a way to go in holding up its end of the deal.

• **Heber Taylor**