

The Times-Picayune

HANO approves building, repair spending

by Katy Reckdahl, The Times-Picayune

Wednesday May 20, 2009, 8:40 PM

One month after a volatile meeting rife with complaints about the agency's disregard for public-housing leaders, the one-woman board of the Housing Authority of New Orleans on Wednesday approved a flurry of repair and construction plans.

Diane Johnson, HANO's federally appointed board chairwoman, sat in front of a freshly framed mission statement and approved nearly \$75 million to redevelop the Lafitte site, to build more than 100 Katrina cottages in Algiers, to modernize existing public housing apartments, to renovate three old buildings at the planned St. Bernard mixed-income development, and to purchase about 40 storm-damaged apartments from homeowners in the agency's Christopher Park development on the West Bank.

Johnson also authorized portable housing vouchers for eligible residents of the long-neglected Iberville development, giving them the option of using rental assistance for apartments elsewhere in the city.

Johnson pledged that HANO would work in the Iberville development "all summer long" to improve conditions in ways that she couldn't yet reveal. The agency must "take back" the complex from criminal elements to protect its children and senior citizens, she said.

"Iberville is our top priority right now," Johnson said. "We will not tolerate the situation we presently have at the Iberville."

Residents have despaired about woeful maintenance and a paucity of social services in the development at the French Quarter's edge, and the problems have been noted in a critical audit by the inspector general for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Resident council leaders drove much of the agenda for Wednesday's meeting, including the new attention paid to Iberville, the new mission statement saying that residents "have a right" to influence agency decisions, and \$5.6 million for assessments of existing HANO apartments, Johnson said. She also officially retired use of the word "projects," to be replaced by "communities."

Last month, HANO was host of a seven-hour resident-leader meeting overseen by a visiting HUD official. The leaders, elected by other residents to represent them in HANO discussions, persuaded the housing authority to focus federal stimulus money on existing units instead of new construction. They also gave examples of how HANO was nonresponsive to residents.

Lillie Walker-Woodfork, resident leader for the authority's scattered sites, believes that the visiting HUD official changed HANO's direction. It's an assessment widely shared by other resident leaders.

"The people at HANO didn't do anything about anything until that man from HUD came to visit," Walker-Woodfork said. "But now they are trying."

In other business, Johnson committed \$45.2 million to the Lafitte redevelopment in the 6th Ward, which is scheduled to break ground next month, the third of the so-called Big Four to do so.

Of the four demolished developments, groundbreaking ceremonies were held several months ago for the former St. Bernard and C.J. Peete complexes. The fourth, B.W. Cooper, seems stalled after losing a key investor late last year.

At Wednesday's meeting, HANO put another \$5 million toward the St. Bernard complex, the 7th Ward mixed-income redevelopment now renamed Columbia Citi at Bayou Residences. The money included \$3.1 million for refurbishing three original brick buildings and \$1.2 million for a second phase of construction at the site. It also added \$750,000 to the redevelopment's infrastructure contract, because of unforeseen repairs needed for streets and pipes. HANO and HUD already have invested \$71.4 million in the 7th Ward site.

Johnson also allotted \$18.6 million to build 104 so-called "HANO cottages," rental and for-sale apartments that will be built during the summer at the William J. Fischer site in Algiers. The Louisiana Recovery Authority, HANO's partner in the project, contributed \$13 million toward the construction.

The apartments must be completed by this fall, before a Sept. 17 Katrina-cottage construction deadline imposed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and a Sept. 30 expiration date for Fischer's HOPE VI grant, HANO officials said.

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