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## Quietly resurrected, disputed homeless housing project moving forward



Cody Duty, Staff

*A six-building complex, Magnolia Glen sits vacant in the 3800 block of Gulf Freeway,. The county and a nonprofit plan to renovate it into a permanent housing for the homeless.*

**By Kiah Collier**

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A plan to convert a vacant motel-turned apartment complex into permanent housing for the homeless died nearly four years ago amid opposition from neighborhood groups and a lone city councilman, despite support from then-Mayor Bill White and all five members of Harris County Commissioners Court.

Plans to renovate the Magnolia Glen Apartments, however, quietly have been revived and are progressing without any financial backing from the

city, or, apparently, the knowledge of the people who fought the project during its earlier incarnation.

The Housing Corporation of Greater Houston, a nonprofit that has been looking to convert the six-building complex in the 3800 block of the Gulf Freeway since at least 2007, has joined forces with the county and secured enough federal funding to refurbish 120 of 184 units.



The former motel, built in the mid-1960s and last used by the University of Houston for graduate student housing, has sat vacant since 2006.

The project, described by officials as part of a larger effort by public and private agencies to address chronic homeless by creating so-called "permanent supportive housing," also calls for on-site social and mental-health services.

Housing Corporation President Tom Forrester Lord said county leaders have "been loyal supporters of the project and we have been caretakers, so to speak, trying to keep it in tow while we waited on the money to do it."

Lord said the agency plans to raise money later to renovate the rest of the units.

"It's a far cry better than letting it stay dormant and unused," said County Commissioner El Franco Lee, whose Precinct 1 encompasses the complex.

The revival of the project, however, was news to Sylvia Medina, president of the Eastwood Civic Association, the main neighborhood group that previously fought the project.

"We kind of feel like it's coming in through the back door because they know how opposed to it we were a few years ago," she said, adding the group has "lots of questions."

The original project stalled in 2009 after Commissioners Court approved funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to renovate the complex, expecting the city, which had handled the housing corporation's funding application, to approve its share shortly after. That never happened as Councilman James Rodriguez opposed the project, saying there already were too many homeless facilities in his East End district.

Two years later, the county received a second wave of Hurricane Ike disaster relief funding from the federal agency and encouraged the housing corporation to submit a funding application. The agency received \$9.3 million last December.

Medina said the community is "supportive of established, low-income housing projects," but still believes that too many end up in the East end.

A spokeswoman for Rodriguez said he still opposes the project.

David Turkel, executive director of the county's Community Services Department, called the lack of knowledge about the project "surprising" because the item has been discussed at several public meetings.

The project, meanwhile, is on a fast track.

Commissioners on Tuesday approved \$542,382 for the project design. The local chapter of Funders Together to End Homelessness is working to raise \$300,000 to buy furnishings.

Renovation work on what will become Earl Hatcher Commons, after the agency's late executive director, will begin in October and is slated for completion next summer.

"We want to expedite this as quick as possible," said Daphne Lemelle, Harris County's director of housing and community development.

Time is of the essence, Lemell said, because the project will replace an existing 120-unit homeless housing facility, which flooded during Ike and is slated for demolition. That is the reason the project qualified for Ike disaster funding, she added.

The city has no plans to pitch in this time, said Marc Eichenbaum, spokesman for the city's housing and community development department.



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