

Black Ministers Urge Alexandria To Save Housing

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Troubled by recent rumblings that some public housing in Alexandria is in jeopardy of being sold or demolished, a coalition of local black ministers met last week with City Council members to discuss the city's position on subsidized housing.

At issue at the hastily called meeting at St. John's Baptist Church was whether recent changes in federal guidelines might prompt the city to sell two of its oldest public housing projects, located on property that is spiralling in value. The new regulations, requiring the city to commit itself to maintaining the housing projects at the same location for 10 years if subsidies were accepted for one year, have prompted some city officials to question the logic of maintaining the deteriorating units.

In December, City Manager Douglas Harman outlined several highly controversial suggestions, including one that called for the demolition of the John Roberts and George Parker Homes projects and selling the land for private development. News of the report has caused anxiety among the more than 500 low-income residents of the two complexes. Officials estimate that nearly 90 percent of the tenants are black.

During the two-hour meeting last week, the ministers frequently alluded to the prime location of the two projects and questioned whether the city's interest in selling the land might be attributed more to high land values than the described deterioration of the 211 units.

The George Parker Homes, four blocks from City Hall in Old Town, is surrounded by townhouses that sell for \$150,000 or more, and the John Roberts Homes, across from the future Braddock Road metro station, sits on 6.4 acres currently assessed at \$5.8 million.

"This is very valuable property we're

talking about . . . and you've got a lot of poor and frustrated residents who feel left out of the decision-making process," said the Rev. Charles Gee. "It's time you quit this con game and let the people know what's going on and what you plan to do."

Acting to palliate the ministers' concerns, council members insisted that although no decision had been made on the future of the projects, the city was committed to maintaining the current number of public housing units. They said that regardless of whether the city decides to forego its federal subsidies — about \$150,000 — on the two housing projects, no tenants would be without housing.

"This is not a question of displacement," Vice Mayor Robert L. Calhoun told the gathering of more than 20 ministers, referring to a 1972 agreement between the council and the city housing authority to maintain 1,100 public housing units in Alexandria. "No person will be displaced until suitable housing is found."

Council member Marlee Inman concurred and indicated plans to introduce a proposal pledging renewed support for the agreement.

"As far as I'm concerned, every bit of money from the sale or lease of the land (if the council decides to sell) will go toward improving the quality of life of the community that lives there (in the public housing projects)," Inman said.

The council members' assurances, however, were not sufficient for some of the ministers.

"I don't understand why this had to come out a few days before Christmas," said Gee. "The onus is now on the council to allay the fears of these residents."

Asked another minister, "Will the rents remain the same? Or will one class of people be squeezed out and another class let in?"