

Task force nearly ready

Housing debated

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Nine months after it was created, an Alexandria public housing task force is almost ready to begin work. But some housing officials have expressed doubts about the effectiveness of the task force and concerns about one of its appointees.

Members of the housing authority's Board of Commissioners recently voted to enlarge the task force to 15 members, including representatives from civic associations located near public housing. The task force will study what to do with 100 units in the Samuel Madden homes — also known as the Berg — and 66 units along the Route 1 corridor.

Both sections, which consist of a total of four blocks, are in need of extensive repair, officials said. The task force will debate the merits of renovating the units and displacing tenants temporarily, or razing the units and relocating tenants.

What the future holds for those blocks has been a hotly debated issue in the city since last summer, when the redevelopment idea was pitched by Shawn McLaughlin, then chairman of the Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority.

The redevelopment proposal led to a heated meeting in June, when many tenants and nearby residents voiced strong disapproval of the plan to ARHA officials. One of the proposal's loudest opponents, Herb Levy, was appointed to the task force as an

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at-large member.

The appointment of Levy has raised a few eyebrows.

"There was an extreme amount of profanity" used by Levy, McLaughlin said. Levy was "adamantly opposed to any kind of redevelopment. This is a so-called adult who's never been to a single housing authority meeting in years and shows up in a tirade."

ARHA commissioner Leonard Calloway had similar memories of that meeting.

At the June meeting Levy "used the most abusive language I've ever heard," Calloway said. "He cussed. He was hollering. He raised hell. I was shocked at some of the words he used."

McLaughlin, who lost a bid to retain the authority's chairmanship and is in the midst of deciding whether to resign from the board, was not at the meeting during which task force members were named. But he and Calloway questioned whether Levy's appointment would undermine the work of the task

force.

"He comes with one agenda — to derail the entire redevelopment," McLaughlin said. "I think you get yourself in a situation where the outcome is already preordained. I question the impartiality of the task force at this point."

Said Calloway: "It seems like [ARHA Chairman] Steve Newman is bringing in a whole lot of problem people. I'm afraid the task force will be a waste of time."

But Newman said many people at the June meeting were vocal and Levy's background as a previous housing authority employee and housing authority commissioner qualifies him to be on the task force.

"Irregardless of how someone may have been perceived at a boisterous meeting back in June, I think it's going to be a constructive, objective discussion," Newman said.

Newman said he didn't recall Levy's behavior being particularly different from anyone else's. But McLaughlin said Newman had to go out into the audience to calm Levy down.

Levy said yesterday that he and others were "livid" about the way

McLaughlin heralded redevelopment to the press without consulting residents first.

"My principal concern is for the residents," Levy said, adding that he believes redevelopment is being pushed because some view the land as "too valuable" for the current residents.

"I don't believe what is at the heart of the discussion is a financial issue," Levy said. "I think it's a class issue."

Because of the way the issue was handled, Levy said, "I was quite angry, and I was not alone."

Levy said public housing needs to remain cohesive to provide a continuous "source of low-rent housing" and preserve an important community in the city's history.

He added that the task force will work better with members who have different views of the proposal.

"Clearly the views are views that are out there in the community," Levy said. "They all need to be represented. If the task force is stacked in one direction or another . . . it wouldn't serve the purpose of airing different perspectives."

But McLaughlin said the Berg

needs to be redeveloped because the idea of clustering public housing in chunks doesn't work.

"I just don't believe concentrated poverty works any longer," he said. "It's a way of life that's outdated, antiquated and broken."

Other task force members include: tenants Sandra Talbert, Donna Jones and Doretha Davis; Deputy City Manager Beverly Steele and Financial Director Arthur Gitajn, representing the city; George H. Lambert Jr., representing the Northern Virginia Urban League, NAACP and Hopkins House; the Rev. Vaughn Booker, representing the Concerned Clergy of Alexandria; and at-large representatives Paul Fiscella and Wayne Neale.

Amy Rose was chosen to represent affordable housing groups as a non-voting member on the task force. Three civic associations will name their representatives and an additional tenant representative will be chosen.

Officials with the Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority said they hope the task force will hold its first meeting during the first week of April.