

Keeping Evergreen best bet for tenants

Recent comments by Senator Fitzgerald in The Herald News reflect a broad misunderstanding about the Mark-to-Market program and project-based Section 8 in general. They also are indicative of a political climate that works for some citizens, but not for all.

Thousands of Americans are watching Joliet right now to see if politics will override the needs of Joliet residents who need affordable housing. Why is the situation garnering so much attention? Because the federal government stopped funding the construction of new rental housing years ago; and project-based Section 8 developments like Evergreen Terrace are critical housing stock that municipalities and citizens can count on to shelter the elderly, disabled, low income and working poor families.

Not only does Evergreen Terrace provide shelter for the 1,000-plus residents currently living there, but when the contract is renewed, it will be available for other families who need it over the next 30 years. Cities and towns with strong leadership view these properties as an asset to be strengthened and improved, not dismantled and demolished. Many cities, working in partnership with owners, have invested their own resources in preserving and redeveloping these types of properties.

This is not public housing; it is privately owned and managed. The willingness of the owner to apply to the Mark-to-Market program, rather than selling the property on the open market; is to be commended. One of the purposes of this program is to refinance the mortgage that the owner pays to a financial institution and to make capital improvements to upgrade the property and to ensure that the management of the property benefits the residents and community.

The statements against the refinancing plan, and the climate of misinformation generally, fly directly in the face of Governor Blagojevich's recent Housing Executive Order which identifies preservation of existing affordable housing as one of six state priorities and the recommendation of the Illinois Housing Development Authority which is responsible for analyzing the property and recommending a comprehensive redevelopment plan.

Your readers might be surprised to hear that there are many successful examples of buildings that have gone through this Mark-to-Market program to improve the lives of tenants and the surrounding neighborhood across the country. But they are: Orlando Northbrook Estates, Normal; Townhomes of the Mill Elgin; Walden Oaks, Woodstock; Watch Hill Tower, Rock Island.

There is concern on many levels. First, without the initiation of the refinancing and improvement plan, the property will suffer severe disrepair leading to condemnation by the City. The City of Joliet will never be able to replace these 360-plus units of affordable rental housing; it is too costly and the federal dollars do not exist.

Second, there is a strong opportunity to preserve and improve Evergreen Terrace. The owner's rehabilitation plans calls for a state-of-the-art

security system, social service supports, repaired elevators, and refurbished apartments among other improvements. The biggest obstacle right now is the quiet hush that is allowing politics to bully these residents right out of town.

Third, and most important; there is little evidence to show that the residents can be relocated into other housing. Evergreen Terrace is the only family project-based Section 8 housing in Joliet. Hundreds of households already are waiting for public housing and vouchers via the Joliet Public Housing Authority. Will County has a shrinking vacancy rate with no growth in sight for the rental market; nor is there a track record of inviting rental development into our metro region. We would like to believe that landlords throughout Will County are signing up to accept Section 8 vouchers for these tenants, but experience tells us that this will be a challenge.

If the parties agree to join together to empower the tenant body and local advocates and stakeholders to create true accountability structures that will ensure quality rehab, sound management and appropriate city services, we believe that Evergreen Terrace can come out of the Mark-to-Market program stronger than it has ever been.

Given the political and funding realities that exist, this is the best shot the tenants have. Kevin F. Jackson is Executive Director of the Chicago Rehab Network.

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