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Mayor plans broad panel for housing

New commission would tackle problem of substandard homes

By Steve Patterson
Times-Union staff writer,

Promising great quality of life benefits, Mayor John Delaney wants to create a commission to oversee housing and community development initiatives worth about \$25 million annually.

The board's duties would include a charge "to eliminate substandard housing in 20 years," as well as coordinate and streamline programs now managed by several agencies, Delaney said last week. An 11-person board appointed by the mayor would run the planned Jacksonville Housing and Community Development Commission.

Anywhere from 20,000 to 40,000 homes in Duval County are thought to lack adequate electricity or plumbing or need significant structural repairs. Additionally, community activists argue thousands of families cannot afford to repair homes or find proper shelter.

"It's a problem that clearly we can't treat in a piecemeal fashion," Delaney told several dozen people at a Habitat for Humanity breakfast marking completion of the Jacksonville chapter's 1,000th home. "We've got to consolidate."

Delaney is still finalizing a plan for the new agency and may complete a detailed proposal this month. The City Council would decide whether to enact the proposal.

As envisioned now, the commission would operate nearly all local programs except those of the Jacksonville Housing Authority, which manages subsidized apartments and administers rent voucher programs.

Creating an umbrella

Mayor John Delaney's housing commission proposal would affect a number of government and non-profit agencies. Among those:

The city's Community Development Division and its Housing Division would join the commission.

The Duval County Housing Finance Authority would be part of the commission and occupy five of the 11 board seats.

Non-profit groups, including Habitat for Humanity, community development corporations and groups that provide housing for the mentally impaired, homeless and people with AIDS, would likely work with the new commission on some projects.

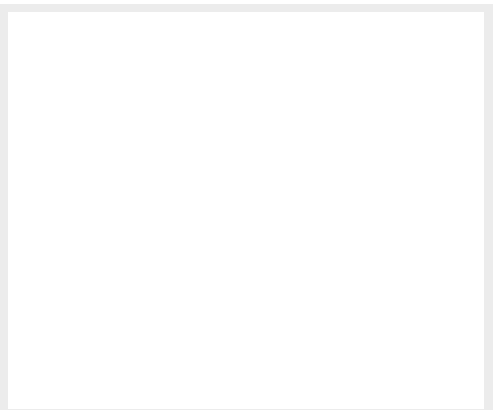
The commission would distribute community development block grants, manage tax credit programs for developers, and run programs that help people buy or repair homes. It also would manage grants and contracts for charities that help the homeless or provide housing services.

The commission's job of consolidating scattered programs follows the model of the Jacksonville Economic Development Commission, the agency Delaney formed early in his administration to manage a maze of offices providing business incentives. Somewhat like that agency, which has promoted development in northern and western parts of the city, Delaney hopes some of the housing commission's energy will target specific neighborhoods, such as the old Eastside adjacent to downtown.

Supporters argue funds carefully spent to improve housing can change lives and neighborhoods -- raising property values, reducing house fires and bettering school performance by improving children's home environments. While the city spent \$400,000 to donate and prepare 462 empty lots for Habitat homes, the completed houses generated \$415,000 in property taxes last year, Delaney said.

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Predictably, the effects of vigorous housing programs are most obvious for the poorest families. A Jacksonville Community Council Inc. study on housing affordability two years ago reported 65 percent of families earning less than \$22,350 were "burdened" by the cost of their homes. That burden can lead people to delay needed repairs in their own houses, or accept rental properties that are unlivable but cheap.

A City Council bond issue set aside \$5 million for housing that the new agency would administer, but otherwise the commission would use existing funds pooled from other agencies. Delaney said he thought the commission could identify additional matching grants, and said the agency could ask the council for more funds in those cases.

In an interview, Delaney argued a clearinghouse-style commission would spend tax dollars more efficiently because it could regularly compare the cost and benefits of each program against all others. "To have competition is beneficial," he said, "to say: 'hey, we're here performing for you.'"

The mayor has tested elements of the plan in meetings with housing interest groups. While some concerns persist, affected groups have expressed those in muted tones and said they support Delaney's goals.

An all-purpose commission can provide "a fair playing field for all the parties" as long as commissioners aren't wed to a single housing issue, said Kevin Gay, executive director of Operation New Hope Community Development Corp.

"It's going to have a broader mind-set. There are a lot of needs to be met," said Gay, whose Springfield-based group trains and hires people to restore historic homes.

The new agency would take over duties of the Duval County Housing Finance Authority, which manages programs to promote affordable housing. The authority's five-person governing board met last week and agreed to ask Delaney to change his plan. The changes are intended to guarantee affordable housing funds will be spread equitably throughout the city, said Richard Browdy, the finance authority's chairman.

"We want to make sure that the authority's mission is ... not diluted but is in fact enhanced by the new structure," said Richard Browdy, the authority's chairman. "I know that's what the mayor wants too."

A draft ordinance developed late last month envisioned the finance authority's board moving onto the new commission. The draft also would create a five-seat finance authority within the commission.

Addressing decrepit housing has been an element of earlier Delaney initiatives, including the Intensive Care Neighborhood campaign that increased city services, including building code enforcement, in several decaying communities. Delaney said he hoped the commission would also use some of its resources to target specific neighborhoods.

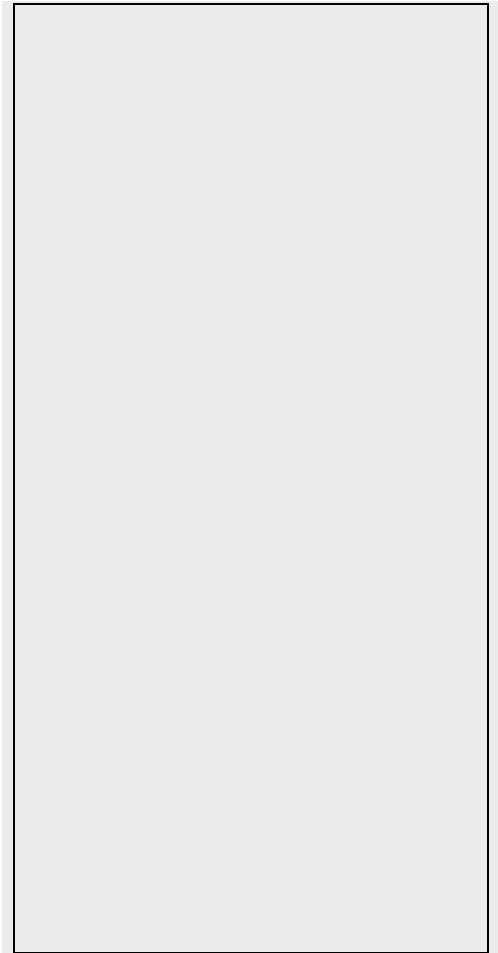
The broad goals of the mayor's initiative were warmly endorsed last week by Habitat for Humanity's founder, Millard Fuller. He said Jacksonville would be the first major city to take up a standing Habitat challenge to completely eradicate substandard housing through a planned campaign.

"Your example of what you're doing here ... is going to motivate a lot [of communities]," Fuller said. "Jacksonville is going to be a better city for everybody."

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