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Oakland Housing Authority Executive Director Responds to Oakland's City Attorney Lawsuit, Legal Brief

OHA Details Funding, Justifies Housing Improvement Strategies as City Attorney Attempts to Defend Decision to Sue

OAKLAND, CA, March 22, 2007 - Public housing is underfunded. This is not some excuse that OHA chooses to hide behind. Over the past decade, because of the relentless cuts to public housing funds, we have been operating Oakland's public housing despite a shortfall of \$8.1 million in operating funds and as much as \$66.6 million in funds for capital improvements. Repairs are delayed. Not only are we unable to complete major rehabilitations of buildings we can't even afford replacing leaky roofs (we are forced to patch old roofs that require replacement). There is no doubt that our housing stock suffers. Our tenants suffer. Now we waste precious time and scarce dollars defending OHA against a frivolous lawsuit. The Authority has begun scheduling the rehabilitation of our 245 scattered sites. To date, we have completed a dozen sites, with three currently under construction and another half dozen in planning. However the need (\$150 million) far surpasses the funds available (\$7.4 million a year), and OHA has begun closing those properties in dire need of rehabilitation. Choices need to be made, priorities set, and some properties will sit vacant waiting future funding.

City Attorney Russo charges that there is "continuous and unabated criminal activity" at OHA properties. There is no evidence to suggest that criminal activity is any different for OHA property than at other properties in Oakland. Criminal activity in the City of Oakland is not a public housing issue; it is a citywide public safety issue. The City of Oakland is responsible for providing the same level of police services to Oakland Housing Authority residents as it does for everybody else. OHA makes a significant contribution to Oakland public safety by funding its own police department to supplement the Oakland Police Department services, and has done so for 35 years. Of the 3200 housing authorities across the nation, the Oakland Housing Authority is one of only seven that has its own police department (Boston, Pittsburg, Cambridge, Philadelphia, Cleveland and Washington, D.C. also have public housing police departments). OHA receives no federal, state or local funds for our police services (the city of Washington, D.C. recently agreed to pay for their housing authority's police force). We spend \$2.8 million of our own money because we recognize the importance of a police presence on our widely scattered properties. Six other housing authorities had to abolish their police

departments because of insufficient funding, including Los Angeles and most recently Baltimore.

Mr. Russo suggests that the Authority, instead of developing new sites, should be spending funds to fix up existing sites. This makes a lot of sense only if one doesn't understand the sources of the grants used to revitalize OHA developments. Mr. Russo and others may need to be reminded that the Oakland Housing Authority has been very creative and very successful in attracting over \$83.7 million in HOPE VI grants to rehabilitate or replace severely distressed properties. These grants were highly competitive and only the most severely distressed public housing in the nation was selected. None of the funds from these grants could have been diverted to other uses. The revitalization plans for all of these grants were supported by the City of Oakland. In fact, the City of Oakland contributed financially to these efforts and was instrumental in many of the planning and design concepts, including expansion of the developments. Without that support, OHA would likely not have been eligible for the grants. Furthermore, these grants were successful because use of both OHA and City of Oakland funds demonstrated a strong local partnership between the two parties.

Another criticism leveled by Mr. Russo is the Authority's land banking. Yes, OHA has been land banking, primarily as a strategy to replace obsolete public housing. To carry out those HOPE VI revitalization strategies, the Authority had to invest in additional land. The Authority and one of its affiliates arranged to purchase the land and apartments (Foothill Family Apartments) in East Oakland as a replacement for a portion of the public housing demolished at Coliseum Gardens. This transaction resulted in part from the efforts and encouragement of Council Member Desley Brooks. The City of Oakland requested that Authority purchase yet another parcel in Council Member Brooks' district. This site, once a motel rife with prostitution, gang activity and drugs, will also be turned into a mixed-income, mixed use development.

After a joint planning process and with the urging of the City of Oakland and BART, OHA has been acquiring land for the Lions Creek Crossings development. We land banked a plot at our Tassafaronga site, and again, this move will improve our chances to receive a HOPE VI grant for this site's much-needed redevelopment .

All this still begs the question of the future of OHA scattered sites. The Authority is currently exploring a variety of strategies to address these issues. Lacking adequate resources to operate and rehabilitate the sites at the level needed, the OHA Board of Commissioners and staff are considering the feasibility of everything from rehabilitation of more buildings to replacement at new, larger sites (like HOPE VI) in exchange for scattered sites. Replacing the scattered sites with properties large enough to support on-site management and other services appears to be a superior solution to maintaining the current sites. To carry out this strategy, however, OHA needs additional land.

In summary, the very strategies that Mr. Russo criticizes are the strategies that will ultimately lead to improved conditions at the scattered sites. OHA is faced with many serious challenges. The City Attorney and City Council members should work with our Commission and OHA's senior staff to ensure that the City and the Authority are in partnership to find the best strategies to meet Oakland's great need for affordable housing in a time of shrinking federal support.

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