

TX -- REBUILDING BEGINS FOR GALVESTON PUBLIC HOUSING 6 YEARS AFTER IKE

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Billy Smith II, Staff

Buddy Herz, center, chairman of the Galveston Housing Authority Board, smiles before the groundbreaking for new public housing that has come after years of bitter debate over whether to rebuild after the devastation of Hurricane Ike.

GALVESTON - Rosalyn Jackson at last has a chance to come home.

After six years of bitter opposition and a federal lawsuit intended to halt it, the rebuilding of Galveston public housing where Jackson once lived is finally underway.

"It's a miracle," said Jackson. "I've been coming to every City Council meeting and fighting."

Jackson made her comments at a groundbreaking for new public housing to replace homes wiped out six years ago by Hurricane Ike, which damaged 70 percent of the structures on Galveston Island.

"It's the best birthday I could have," said Jackson, who turned 48 on Wednesday.

The acrimony that characterized much of the debate over rebuilding public housing surfaced briefly in a speech by Galveston Housing Authority Chairman Buddy Herz.

A former mayor fiercely opposed to rebuilding public housing appointed Herz and two others to the housing authority board with the intention of killing reconstruction. Elected on an anti-public housing platform in 2012, then-Mayor Lewis Rosen and a council majority opposed the rebuilding plans, leading to a confrontation with state and federal officials that nearly cost Galveston millions of dollars in Hurricane Ike disaster aid.

Speaking to a crowd of about 200 that included Rosen and many public housing supporters, Herz told how his initial opposition to public housing turned into support.

Herz said he resigned at one point after realizing that the Texas General Land Office and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development would not budge from their commitment to rebuild the 569 units torn down after the storm. "I resigned six weeks through my term in complete and utter frustration," he said, but reconsidered after his wife convinced him that real change could happen.



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(center) Former resident of Cedar Terrace Phyllis Brooks before the ground breaking of the Cedars at Carver Park and Villas on The Strand Wednesday September 10, 2014. Phyllis Brooks hopes to be able to move into one of the two new apartments .The groundbreaking marks the beginning of construction after years of bitter debate over whether to rebuild public housing. The apartments will be a mix of town homes and garden apartments, 144 for low-income residents and the remainder to be rented at market rates. (Billy Smith II/ Houston Chronicle)

Housing before Ike

He said the public housing that existed before Hurricane Ike hit Galveston in September 2013 was "disrespectful" and a "disgrace" because of the poor conditions and a tendency to lock people into poverty. His views began to change after an attorney for housing advocates assured Herz that mixed-income housing, where at least 50 percent of a new housing development is rented at market value, would help pull residents out of poverty.

"This will succeed," Herz vowed.

The Land Office cut off aid for a short time before the city finally approved a rebuilding plan. Herz complimented Rosen for backing off and restoring federal funds.

Rosen now said he backs the mixed-housing plan. "It's a positive ... step for Galveston," he said.

Of the four past and present mayors at the groundbreaking, Rosen was the only one who opposed public housing. The current mayor, Jim Yarbrough, took a jab at the former mayor and previous council, saying the city needs help from the Land office and HUD. "We can't slap our partner on one side and then ask for money on the other," Yarbrough said.



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Rosalyn Jackson, one of nearly 2,000 on a waiting list for the housing, said she had fought at City Council meetings for the new public complex.

He predicted that the rebuilt public housing would spur private investment and help revitalize Galveston's north side, historically the city's most impoverished area.

The groundbreaking was a vindication for Betty Massey, the housing authority chairwoman whom Herz replaced in 2012. The mixed-income housing plan used by the housing authority was in large part devised by Massey, who flew to other cities to find plans that worked. Rosen tried to dismantle the plan as soon as he took office, replacing Massey and the housing authority board. The final plan calls for the housing authority to build 141 low-income units and 138 market units at two sites. Forty units were completed three years ago and the remainder of the 569 units to be replaced will be at scattered sites under a plan being developed by the Land Office.

'Affordable housing'

"It's a long time coming - too long," Massey said. "It's about providing Galveston low-income members with safe, affordable housing."

Jackson is among 1,942 people on a waiting list for the new public housing, which will also offer day care, job counseling and education for low-income residents. Last month Jackson and 600

former public housing residents met at Galveston's North Park for a reunion that she helped organize. Many now live off the island and want to return, she said. Jackson, who is disabled and now spends more than half of her income on monthly rent of \$946, is hopeful.

"This is a blessed day," she said about her chance to return to public housing.