

## Beaumont tries for \$20M housing grant

By DEE DIXON, The Enterprise  
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Two-year old Camron Dickenson and his sister, Chanelle Dickenson, 1, sit through a meeting at Magnolia Gardens where Scott Jepsen, with Abt Associates Inc., talks to residents about the \$20 million dollar HOPE VI grant the Beaumont Housing Authority is applying for this year. The grant would help redevelop the housing complex and neighborhood.  
*Jennifer Reynolds/The Enterprise*

BEAUMONT - Sarah Brown likes living in her Magnolia Gardens neighborhood, but news of a proposed development has her looking forward to moving into a new abode.

"It started off as a good place," said the 52-year-old Brown, who moved in with her 6-year-old son in 1986. "It will be nice to be in a different environment that is quiet. I will be able to come home, feel relaxed and sit on the porch and feel safe."

The Beaumont Housing Authority is applying for a \$20 million HOPE VI grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development that would replace the existing Magnolia Gardens, built in 1954.

Under the proposed plan, the city would raze the 194-unit Magnolia Gardens complex and construct 150 units along with single-family homes on part of the South Texas State Fairgrounds. When those are complete, another 150 units would go up on the Magnolia Gardens site.

The housing that will be built will be for residents of mixed income.

The housing authority will be competing for one of three grants to be awarded nationwide.

To make sure the housing authority has an aggressive application, professional grant writers have been contracted from Abt Associates Inc., which is a Massachusetts-based company that has 40-years of experience of writing grants for housing authorities, housing authority Executive Director Robert L. Reyna said.

"We have a very slim chance, but we have a strong chance," Reyna said in a meeting with social service agencies Tuesday.

He said the city would be a viable contender for the grant only with the help of social service agencies willing to team up with the housing authority to offer programs to Magnolia Gardens residents before, during and after their transition.

The programs that could be offered would contribute to a point total making the grant application

stronger, he explained.

Any businesses located in the Magnolia Gardens area are encouraged to attend a stakeholders meeting at 2:30 p.m. today at the housing authority's headquarters at 1890 Laurel. People will learn about the preliminary plans for development along Magnolia Avenue during that session.

Non-profit agencies that provide social services, faith-based groups and churches are encouraged to attend another meeting at 3 p.m. May 25 at the housing authority office on Laurel.

Abt analyst Melissa Vandawalker said the next step is to conduct a needs survey with the residents at the complex to find out what their goals are throughout the four-year grant. She said graduate students from Lamar University will sit down with the residents and talk to them about what they would like to do and find out what kind of support they need to accomplish their goals.

A condition of the grant requires measurable goals throughout and at the end of the four-year allotment, Abt principal associate Scott Jepsen said.

He explained the purpose of the grant is to demolish distressed housing developments and revitalize the neighborhoods.

Abt personnel have been involved with HOPE VI grant projects since 1993, and they have seen how the money has turned communities around.

In Seattle, a public housing project was demolished and affordable apartments and homes were built. Now, with all the development surrounding the project, there are new homes moving into the vicinity that cost \$700,000.

Once stakeholders see that there is a viable economic base in a revitalized community, residents will be able to take advantage of that to bring in new business.

Right now, residents only have one grocery store in the area.

Beverly Richard, a retired 62-year-old Magnolia Gardens resident, said she is looking forward to some of the other developments that could come with the proposed project.

"I think that is going to be wonderful," she said. "Maybe they will have something different to offer senior citizens."

The housing authority will find out in September if it will receive the grant.

During Tuesday's meeting, some questions came up about whether a community center would be integrated in the design plans.

Jepsen stressed that in order for a community center to work, it would need to be self-sustaining or it would eventually fail.

Reyna pointed out Houston's Allen Parkway Village, which received HOPE VI funds in 1993. There the Salvation Army, Area Agency on Aging and Head Start all came to the housing authority with design specifications that would allow them to operate programs out of the center. In return, the agencies agreed to pay staff to remain onsite.

Reyna said he would like to see the local project spur development all along Magnolia Avenue, from Interstate 10 to East Lucas Drive.

For more information about the upcoming meetings, call the housing authority at (409) 951-7200.