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Fairgrounds could turn to home turf

Housing that would give low-income residents a chance at ownership is planned for portion of Fair Park property

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Scott Eslinger/The Enterprise

The Beaumont Housing Authority announced plans to demolish Magnolia Gardens to build a \$20 million project that will create more public housing in its place and on the city's Fair Park complex.

BEAUMONT - For Onesia Montgomery, living in her apartment in Magnolia Gardens with her children Brycen, 3, and Jaylynn, 2, was a last resort.

The walls of the 53-year-old structure are paper-thin, the yellow-tinged siding is falling apart and her air-conditioner barely works, but Montgomery looks past all that when she thinks of her dream house that will proudly display her diploma on the wall.

Owning a home soon might be a reality for the 25-year-old medical office specialist student - if the city approves the sale of 27.9 acres of land situated on the old Fair Park property to the Beaumont Housing Authority at a special meeting Friday.

"It will not in any manner affect the continued use of Fair Park," said Beaumont Mayor Guy Goodson, adding that the piece of property in question is the former grassy area used for parking during the fair, which was held there from 1932 to 2003.

"We recognized as the uses have changed at the Fair Park, it would be a good location because it already backed up to an existing neighborhood."

The sale, which will not force demolition of the Harvest Club or the Fair Park Coliseum, will make way for 83 single family homes and 139 apartment units for the housing authority.

"It's going to change the quality of life in that neighborhood and revitalize that area," said Robert L. Reyna, executive director of the Beaumont Housing Authority.

The housing authority is applying for a \$20 million grant from the U.S. Housing and Urban Development Department to create more public housing at Fair Park, as well as demolish the 195-unit Magnolia Garden apartment complex to build a new, more spacious 158-unit dwelling.

The goal is to move residents from the low-income apartment complexes into the world of home ownership, Reyna said.

"What we are proposing to do is to build housing that will be accessible to some low-income, but also working-poor families. And as income and credit improve, if they want to move to home ownership, they can do that as well," Reyna said.

Families like the one headed by Montgomery, who has lived in the small apartment for two years and wants more space and pride for her two small kids, are anticipating the spacious three-bedroom, two-bathroom homes planned for Fair Park.

"So they can play outside," she said, while standing in the doorway of her apartment. "Or having a room, 'Look at what mom did, I did this for you two.' "

The massive project is one of 12 to 15 applications going to HUD as part of the H.O.P.E. IV (Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere) grant. With only \$71.9 million available and a maximum of \$20 million allocated to each project, just 3½ grants may be awarded. But Reyna is confident the funds will come to Beaumont because of the intense housing needs.

It would cost \$8.4 million just to get the existing Magnolia Gardens complex into livable condition and in compliance with building codes - including repairs to broken windows and doors that won't shut all the way, cleaning out mildew and removing lead-based paint and asbestos.

"It's ugly and it looks like a prison," Reyna said. "We decided if we're going to spend that money, we should redo it."

The public housing complex also suffered a huge hit from Hurricane Rita with roofs and siding blown away, trees that fell through units and mold spreading through some apartments. With only 53 households remaining at the complex, demolition seems to be the only option, Reyna said.

Montgomery can't wait for the project and to have a place of her own - a place where you can't hear a neighbor's conversation.

"In the bathroom you can hear the people in their bathroom next door," she said with a grimace as her 3-year-old giggled. That's a noise Montgomery hopes she won't have to hear again once the housing grant comes through.