



THE REGION

TEXAS AND LOUISIANA

9A

Sale of Fair Park land approved

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THE ENTERPRISE

BEAUMONT — City Council approved the sale of about 28 acres of land at Fair Park to the Beaumont Housing Authority in a 4-1 vote during a special meeting Friday.

The contract is pending the satisfaction of all charter provisions and would limit the use of the property to affordable housing. The sales contract is being submitted as part of an application to the

Housing and Urban Development for \$20 million in funds to tear down Magnolia Gardens and rebuild more apartments units and affordable homes in its place and at Fair Park.

The lone dissenting vote came from Councilman Audwin Samuel. While in favor of the housing authority's proposal, he said he was uncomfortable that the action did not follow procedures required by the city's charter.

"I support what's being done

wholeheartedly — 150 percent, but I'm concerned about our ability to do this without going to the voters as prescribed by our charter," Samuel said, adding the charter indicates that any sale of public land must go before the voters.

The housing authority can claim eminent domain, which would void the voter requirement, but it has not yet filed for it. Eminent domain is a method government entities exercise to acquire property for the completion of a

public project.

"As much as I want this to happen, I feel uncomfortable entering into a contract," Samuel said. "I don't want to do anything that violates the charter or the spirit of the charter."

Because the housing authority is facing a tight deadline to submit the application, the pressure was on city council to approve the project Friday. Otherwise, the project

PARK, page 10A

PARK : 139 apartments, 83 single-family homes make up proposal

Continued from page 9A

would not come to fruition.

"I think we can work through this," said Councilwoman Lulu Smith. "We agree the need for this in this area is really great and I think it's a wonderful program out there and I would hate to see this not happen today."

In an effort to meet the stipulations of the charter as well as the needs of the housing authority, the council voted in favor of the contract with the written understanding that if the housing authority did not move forward in eminent domain proceedings, then the

city would put the measure on the November ballot in accordance with the city charter.

"I have mixed feelings about it too," said Councilwoman Bobbie Patterson, adding she could live with voting for it only with the attached stipulations.

Even with the compromise, Samuel voted against the contract because it was violated the spirit of the charter and he believed the housing authority should file condemnation to exercise its right for eminent domain before the city took official action.

"If we need to satisfy the charter concerns, we will go

file the paperwork," said Robert L. Reyna, executive director of the Beaumont Housing Authority.

The H.O.P.E. VI project, if approved by HUD, will tear down the 195 hurricane-damaged units at Magnolia Gardens and build a more spacious 158-unit complex. In Fair Park's grassy parking lot area, 139 apartment units and 83 single-family homes will be constructed for use by residents who qualify. The premise of the program is that families will be able to buy houses at affordable prices — moving them out of the apartments and into home ownership.

As much as Reyna wanted the motion to pass, he said he understood Samuel's concerns.

"I'm glad Audwin raised the issue. We don't want anyone to question or challenge (the vote) as something that was done behind anyone's back," Reyna said. "We were able to come to what will be a fantastic agreement."

The land has been appraised at \$365,000. HUD will make its announcement regarding the money by Sept. 15.

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