

# Housing authority director plans more building

By **DAN WALLACH**

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BEAUMONT - Robert Reyna walked over the scarred and scraped ground where the bleak and forlorn Magnolia Gardens housing project once stood.

Reyna has plans for the site that once comprised 195 "units," in housing authority parlance.

It's to be called Pointe North and it will be the new home for people who are committed to improving their own lives, Reyna said.

"Some people think we have to take all comers, and we don't," Reyna said of the housing authority.

"We're not a dumping ground. Our job is to give people a hand up and help them move on."

The new developments of Regent 1 - nearing completion at the old Beaumont fairgrounds on Gulf Street - and Pointe North represent a departure from the general perception of what housing authorities offer.

When the Beaumont Housing Authority won a nationally competitive grant for \$20 million to build something new, Reyna set out to change the perception.

"We could have done it on the cheap - no brick, just Hardi Plank, let's go. What kind of image or incentive is that? You're putting people in the same box they came out of," Reyna said.

The \$20 million is a grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and urban Development. The entire development - Regent 1 on Gulf Street, Pointe North on Magnolia, and Regent 2, which is 83 single-family homes to be built adjacent to the Regent 1 site, amounts to about \$52 million.

The balance of the money is from HUD's Hurricane Rita recovery money, private capital through federal housing credits and grants, and in-kind services that helped provide a match for the competitive grant.

The developments represent a stunning turnaround from eight years ago when HUD took over the Beaumont Housing Authority, which was mired in administrative and property management problems.

Evelyn Lord, who had returned as mayor in 2002 after serving in the office from 1990-94, helped lead the renewal of the housing authority in appointing a new board and reclaiming local control from HUD.

Reyna was hired in 2003 as executive director.

"I looked at Evelyn Lord and said, 'Our job is to him (the HUD-appointed interim director) out of here,'" Reyna said. "Eighteen months later, he was gone."

Lord said Reyna's point of view is asking people - the housing authority residents - what they were going to do for themselves.

"That speaks to a lot of conservative people," Lord said. "It's a hand up as opposed to a hand out."

Reyna, ever in the perception-changing business, said he wants to ensure that residents of Regent 1 and Pointe North are kept free of the kind of viciousness that threatens people in lower-income neighborhoods.

"When you have so many people trying to live right, follow the rules, it's not fair to put them next to dope dealers," he said. "It's a hard message for some to hear. But we owe it to the families and to the taxpayers."



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## Robert Reyna, 55 years old

Grew up in Dallas public housing

Has worked in public housing for:

- ❖ 6 years in San Antonio
- ❖ 2 years in San Diego
- ❖ 10 years in Fort Worth
- ❖ 13 years in Houston
- ❖ 5 years in Beaumont, his first assignment as an executive director.

**Quote:** "We can create a lot of problems ourselves in the way we treat people. If we're firm and fair, that's all people want."