

Birmingham loses HUD grant

Citizens react to fund cutoff

By MARY CONNELLY-SZCZESNY

It's likely Birmingham officials will continue to oppose federal regulations that the city provide subsidized low-income housing.

As a result, the city may have little chance of regaining \$88,850 in federal funds it planned to receive this fall.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) announced Monday that Birmingham has lost the money, obtained through HUD's community development block grant program, because of the city's refusal to provide subsidized housing for low and moderate income families and the elderly.

To regain the funds, HUD says the city must provide a housing program similar to one proposed in a referendum overwhelmingly rejected by voters in April.

If the city doesn't show its commitment to supply such housing by Jan. 15, the money will be distributed to other Oakland County communities, HUD officials said.

The HUD action marks the second time this year a Detroit area suburb lost community development funds. In February, a federal judge ruled Livonia was ineligible to receive nearly \$200,000 in community development funds because of its failure to

build new low-income housing.

The 1974 federal law that established the community development program requires all recipient communities to take some steps to meet the housing needs of low-income residents.

Birmingham has received community development funds for the past three years.

THE BIRMINGHAM CITY commission is not expected to comply with HUD's funding requirements since a majority of commissioners elected in April based their campaign on opposition to subsidized housing. Three pro-housing commissioners were subsequently recalled from office in May.

"They're (HUD) telling us they don't give a damn what people voted," city Commissioner Gary Kain said at Monday's commission meeting. "They want us to reverse administratively what people decided at the polls."

Mayor Robert Kelly said Birmingham will "survive" without the money, if HUD does not respond favorably to the city's efforts to regain the funds.

The city plans to ask several members of the state's congressional delegation in Washington "to aggressively oppose" HUD's action and "stand up on their hind legs to say we deserve the money and have earned it," according to Kelly.

Support may also be sought from Oakland County, which distributes the block grant money to county communities under \$50,000 in population. Commissioners are also considering possible legal action to regain the money.

THE \$88,850, which would have become available Oct. 1, was earmarked for park development in the Forest-Chesnut-Hazel-Elm street area, for code enforcement, low interest home rehabilitation loans and grants and administrative costs.

HUD's decision to withhold the community development funds was contained in a letter to Oakland County officials who act as middlemen in administering the federal program. The federal agency said that Birmingham's failure to supply subsidized rental housing was affecting the county's housing goals.

HUD charged that because Birmingham voters rejected 202 subsidized housing units for elderly and families in April, the county was 33 per cent below its 1977 housing goals.

"This shortfall is significant, serious and conclusively demonstrates the detrimental effect of Birmingham's action upon the county's housing assistance plan performance," HUD area manager Stephen Brown said in the letter.

Birmingham officials rejected HUD's allegation. The city's grant administrator Kelley Sweeney said that it was "not very well justified."

BIRMINGHAM VOTERS rejected construction of a 152-unit subsidized senior housing complex last spring. The project, funded through the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA), would have required the city to also provide subsidized housing for 75 low to moderate income families. MSHDA's controversial two-to-one ratio led to the downfall of the senior housing project.

Mayor Kelly maintained that Birmingham is pursuing construction of senior citizen housing.

"I don't know what kind of blackmail to call this—social, political or bureaucratic," Kelly said of HUD's action. "These people are putting us in the position of hurting those in the community who really need it."

"We have nothing to be ashamed of," Kelly said of the city's housing programs. "We have a program second to none in the county."

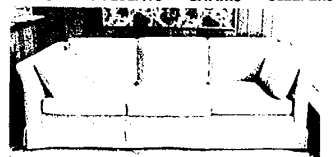
The city has had a housing assistance program for low and moderate income families for a year and a half, Kelly said. Nine families are receiving rent assistance through the city's current program, according to the mayor, who added that HUD regulations prohibit offering aid to more residents.

Kelly charged that rent limits set by HUD are below fair market rents in Birmingham and, consequently, landlords are reluctant to accept subsidized renters.

"We're being criticized for providing something the market place won't allow," Kelly charged.

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Father Holtgrewe, a native of Cincinnati, has spent most of his 15 years as a priest in pastoral work.

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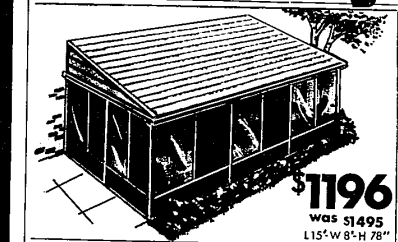
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