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## Oakland housing agency reassures tenants who fear Section 8 voucher plans

### Eviction worries unfounded

By Cecily Burt  
Oakland Tribune

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OAKLAND — Jimmy "Mack" McClendon feared the worst when he crowded into the Oakland Housing Authority board meeting Monday night.

As a nearly 30-year resident in a small apartment complex on 29th Street, he had heard rumors that the public housing agency planned to sell off more than 200 small apartment buildings, and he worried that his family would be evicted from their longtime home.

Not so, the board promised.

But the board did vote Monday to move ahead with a plan to transfer its 254 small public housing properties to Section 8 housing, 1,615 units in all.

The buildings are scattered all over the city, and most are small, with four, six or eight units. The largest has 27 apartments; six of them are single-family homes. The agency's large housing sites are not included in the plan.

If the board's promise holds true, the change should mean little to low-income tenants, who can stay put if they want or use the Section 8 vouchers to move wherever they choose, basically any state except Hawaii.

Yet the change from public housing to Section 8 will bring significantly more dollars — perhaps as much as \$400 to \$500 more per housing unit — to the beleaguered public housing agency. Those extra dollars will be used to help manage, maintain and upgrade its aging and far-flung housing stock, said executive director Jon Gresley.

It will also require a change of ownership title for those buildings, which spawned rumors of a sale and evictions.

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This apartment complex on 7th Avenue in Oakland, Calif., owned by the Housing Authority, is...

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OHA commissioners assured McClendon and others who packed Monday's board meeting that the agency intends to keep the properties under its control by transferring them to a nonprofit entity it would form that might include board members and executive staff, or by partnering with a separate affiliate.

"We're the horse's mouth right here," said OHA commission chairman Moses Mayne. "We're committed to keeping our housing stock. All of it."

"If we (do nothing), our housing with roofs crumbling, drywall crumbling "... will crumble around our residents, and they will lose," Mayne added. "You may not believe it, but we are doing the right thing."

OHA has a federal contract with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to provide public housing for low-income tenants, and it is reimbursed by the federal agency for the costs, based on a formula computed and set by HUD on an annual basis.

But HUD only subsidizes a portion of those costs, currently about 82 percent, for operating and maintaining its housing stock, or about \$500 a unit.

Under Section 8, OHA will get reimbursed 105 percent of the federal amount set for

reimbursements, or between \$900 and \$1,000 a unit, said Ann Dunn, a senior policy analyst with the housing authority.

Any money left over after paying for operations and maintenance will be used to rehab the housing stock that needs it, or create new housing, Dunn said. Several maintenance projects are under way, but the agency estimates the backlog of capital projects at the sites could cost as much as \$100 million, money the agency simply doesn't have.

Both public housing and Section 8 vouchers are rental assistance programs for the low-income. Public housing is a dedicated building that offers affordable units with rents based on a renter's income level; Section 8 provides vouchers, good for a portion of the rent, which tenants can use to help pay the rent anywhere they choose to live.

"Some of the units are in bad shape," Dunn said. "Any excess cash we get from rental reimbursements or sale of units "... has to go to rehab the units or replace them."

The immediate sale she is referring to involves five different properties in East Oakland that have been vacant for a very long time and would cost more to rehabilitate than they are worth.

The five vacant properties will first be offered to a nonprofit, but "it's probably not feasible" that anyone would want them, Dunn said. According to the plan, the housing authority will also conduct a review of all its small properties to determine which ones could be sold and the proceeds used to build larger, mixed-income facilities similar to the OHA-run Mandela Gateway, near the West Oakland BART station. That process will take five to 10 years.

The housing authority has been criticized for letting some apartment buildings deteriorate to the point where they are a blight on the surrounding neighborhoods and magnets for drug dealers, prostitutes and other criminal behavior.

The city of Oakland sued the agency in February 2007 because of those issues and to try and force it to clean up its properties and hire managers to oversee its so-called scattered sites, the very ones OHA wants to offer as Section 8 housing.

Commissioner Alfred Lee said the deteriorating, blighted apartment buildings give the authority a "black eye."

During the meeting McClendon, 59, a founding member of the a capella vocal group The Legendary O'Town Passions, told the commissioners that he felt they were "trying to do good," but he also told them they had a lot of work ahead of them to convince all their tenants that Section 8 was in their best interests.

"I got some people who are afraid to come to the meeting because they are afraid if they make waves, you'll put them out," he said.

HUD must first approve OHA's disposition plan, which effectively lets the agency out of its contract to provide public housing, before a separate application is submitted to obtain Section 8 vouchers for each unit. If the authority's application for Section 8 vouchers is denied, the 1,615 units will remain as public housing.

Once the vouchers are received, housing authority representatives will meet with each family to help them transition to Section 8. Families who move will be eligible for relocation assistance.

Representatives from East Bay Housing Organizations, Just Cause and other affordable housing advocates worked closely with the housing authority staff to review the disposition application and push for more protections for tenants.

Amie Fishman, executive director of EBHO, told the commission that she fully understood why the housing agency was seeking the change, but she wanted language in the agreement to ensure that the units will be permanently affordable, no matter who owns them. She also said the agency needs to find other funds to help rehabilitate the housing without draining city resources.

Representatives from Just Cause Oakland had hoped to convince the commissioners to delay a vote on the disposition plan until more details could be worked out. Lisa Grief of Bay Area Legal Aid said she appreciated the assurances and comments by the OHA commissioners and executive staff, but those assurances needed to be put in writing.

"The disposition plan needs to be clearer," she said. "There needs to be a grievance procedure ... What if people need special accommodations?"

The commissioners said housing advocates would be consulted throughout the process. The housing authority will submit its application to HUD for the first part of the process in about 10 days, Dunn said.

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