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SURPLUS LANDS & LOCAL GOVERNMENTS: A Source for Affordable Housing



BY CALEENA SHIRLEY

For many not-for-profit organizations an impediment to meeting community needs and developing affordable housing units, is the cost burden of land acquisition. Unbeknown to most development providers, the solution to this dilemma may be right around the corner at your local city hall. Local governments are the key pieces of the community development puzzle in that they are one of the largest owners of surplus land. Acknowledging that land availability is an integral component in developing affordable housing, the Florida Legislature passed House Bill No. 1363 in 2006. The bill established statutes §125.379 and §166.0451, which mandated that local governments prepare an inventory of properties owned fee simple by the municipality and identify those properties that may be eligible for affordable housing development. This article takes a closer look at the implementation of these state statutes in the City of Jacksonville, Florida.

LEADING THE WAY

For more than thirty years the City of Jacksonville

has been working to address the need for affordable housing. Jacksonville is a consolidated government and often owns more than one thousand properties at any given time. Many of the properties are acquired via foreclosing on city liens and through the reversion of tax-delinquent properties. The city passed Ordinance 1997-14-E in an effort to manage the large number of residential properties within the inventory, and provide a means to reactivate those properties for the purpose of community development. The ordinance established a method to donate residential City properties to not-for-profit corporations, specifically Habitat for Humanity of Jacksonville and Community Housing Development Organizations (CHDOs). Furthering the city’s commitment, the use of donated properties would be solely for the purpose of providing housing for the low to moderate income community.

In conformance with the State of Florida’s 2006 mandate to identify and make surplus land inventory lists public, the City passed Ordinance 2007-656-E and adopted its first inventory of all real property. Currently the inventory is updated every 3 years and posted on the City’s website for public viewing.



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BRIDGING THE GAP TO PROVIDE AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Working together for a common good, successful community development is accomplished when partnerships are formed between local municipalities and vested stakeholders. Habitat for Humanity Jacksonville, Inc. has one of the longest standing and community impacting partnerships with the City of Jacksonville.

Opening its doors in 1988 Habitat for Humanity of Jacksonville, also known as HabiJax, is one of the largest developers of affordable housing and has provided home ownership services to over 1,900 applicants. From 1991 to date, the City of Jacksonville has donated 541 parcels of land to HabiJax. With the exception of 63 parcels, all of the properties have been completely redeveloped. Donating surplus properties to not-for-profit corporations is a key component in stabilizing neighborhoods, and can successfully repurpose properties once abandoned. One such example has been the epic transformation of a neighborhood known as New Town.

NEW TOWN SUCCESS ZONE

Suffering from the impacts of property deterioration and high rates of crime, in 2007 community leaders identified a twenty-block area of the city, known as New Town, to target and develop a strategy for the stabilization of the neighborhood. The New Town Success Zone is anchored by the partnership of public and private organizations focusing on the target area to develop a continuum of services to help families living in the New Town neighborhood. At the center of the movement is the establishment of affordable housing.

After several years of providing affordable housing throughout five areas within Jacksonville's urban core, HabiJax made

a transformational decision to centralize its development efforts and target the New Town Success Zone. In an effort to expand their involvement from residential home builders, HabiJax evolved into community development specialist. Embracing their new role, the organization performed a complete visual assessment of every house in the neighborhood and established a long term housing reinvestment plan. Growing their development model the organization renovates existing homes, along with purchasing abandoned and foreclosed properties. The organization's goal is to help 400 residents obtain home ownership, a feat that is hoped to solidify the successful transformation of the New Town neighborhood.



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Future Development Opportunities

Great accomplishments have been made through the City of Jacksonville's partnerships with not-for-profit corporations and its seven CHDO partners. Since 1991 the City has donated over 600 properties to increase its affordable housing stock. An assessment of the City's current inventory identified 316 properties that are potentially available for future affordable housing donation. Many municipalities' surplus land inventories continue to grow, yet establishing a property convey-

ance plan and ensuring financial resources are available to develop these properties complicate the rate at which donations take place. Throughout the State of Florida the redevelopment of surplus properties remains a vital component of community stabilization, and is proving to be a dependable source for the advancement of affordable housing initiatives. [HNN](#)

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Would Free Property Help Your Nonprofit?

Come to the workshop at the Florida Housing Coalition Conference on September 1 to learn about the variety of ways local governments make land available to nonprofits