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Public housing authority meets demands of relocated residents

ARHA chief says agency just followed protocol

BY DAVID SACHS

Residents and ousted occupants of the James Bland housing projects said they received justice Saturday after the Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority agreed to their demands for fair treatment.

The first phase of redeveloping north Old Town into a mixed-use, mixed-income neighborhood commenced around the holidays last year, beginning with the eviction and relocation of tenants — the first of 180 families — to government housing sites around the city.

But when it became time to move out, complaints from residents saying they did not receive fair warning permeated the process. Some said they were given only 72 hours notice and were fined for not getting their belongings out in time. Others had maintenance issues with their new homes.

“All we’re asking for — our demands are very simple — is communication,” said phased out resident Hattie Thompson in April. “But it’s falling on deaf ears.”

Affected residents lashed back. They organized with Virginians Organized for Interfaith Community Enhance-



PHOTO/DAVID SACHS

James Bland public housing resident Barbara Crowder speaks to city council members Saturday at a public hearing where, along with her neighbors, she claimed victory over what she deemed unfair treatment.

ment and began voicing demands to ARHA, culminating in a dramatic walkout during a work session between the housing authority and the Alexandria City Council in April.

On Saturday residents testified to members of city council that several meetings with ARHA — which is not directly under council’s control — resulted in a win for them.

“There were many tense moments as we worked diligently to hold our public officials accountable and get resolutions to our problems,” said Bland resident Barbara Crowder. “It was a wonderful

experience, it brought me a long ways and taught me how to be persistent.”

Crowder opted for a housing voucher rather than moving within the city.

ARHA did not agree do any ‘demands,’ according to CEO Roy Priest. His office was just falling in line with rules set by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, he said.

“There was nothing discussed or agreed upon that was out of line with HUD policies and guidelines and our decisions on issues raised on be-

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half of the Bland residents were in keeping with our normal operating practices,” Priest said. “Under my leadership ARHA has consistently worked to provide a reasonable and high

level of quality service to our residents and we are committed to continue. The outcome achieved through our collaboration with VOICE was possible because of our desire to provide an effective relocation process for our Bland residents.”

ARHA agreed to reimburse transferred residents \$500 per

family for incurred moving costs and to let Martha Crump, a Bland resident with Alzheimer’s who was relocated against doctor’s orders, return to the neighborhood with which she’s familiar, VOICE members said.

The housing authority will provide options for residents under the newfound agree-

ment: parents can negotiate to keep their children in the public school, even if they relocate to another zone. And ARHA must inspect all “scatter site” homes with the residents and put in a work order for any maintenance necessary, to be completed within 30 days under the agreement.

Should a housing voucher prove futile in another city, Bland residents have the right to relocate to Alexandria public housing under the agreement — and the right of first refusal to move back into the Bland units once redevelopment is complete,” according to the agreement.