

## Jeff councilman opposes blighted apartment rehab

by Deon Roberts Social Media Editor – May 26, 2007

GRETNA — A Dallas developer wants to buy and repair blighted apartments on the West Bank to solve a post-hurricane affordable housing crisis.

But Howard Gyler says if Jefferson Parish does not force owners of damaged apartments to secure them from further destruction, it will become too expensive for developers to rehabilitate them.

“Right now many of these properties are at risk of being able to be renovated at all,” said Gyler, who is rebuilding the former Riverchase apartments at 200 Holmes Blvd. in Gretna.

While Gyler wants apartments salvaged, Councilman Chris Roberts would like to see rundown complexes bulldozed.

“If they fall into further disrepair, that’s only better. That only furthers our ability to get some of these rat holes torn down. I think it’s all part of a strategic process,” Roberts said.

“If I have my prerogative, any of them we can get our hands on to tear down, we’re going to. Especially the ones that are blighted and a nuisance,” he said.

Gyler has his eye on five complexes totaling 1,118 apartments. He would not disclose their locations because of ongoing negotiations with sellers, but he said they are in Gretna, Terrytown and Harvey.

Gyler is overhauling Riverchase, which opened in 1968, and renamed it The Pines. He is accepting Section 8 tenants, who receive government rent subsidies, at The Pines although he’s not required to by law since the \$5.6-million renovation is financed with private funds. When tax credits and other public subsidies are used, rents can be restricted and the property can be forced to accept Section 8 residents.

“Because I didn’t take any of the government money, I have no fixed rents, I have no set-aside. And I don’t have to take every Section 8 person with a voucher.”

The Pines has a range of rents, including units that go for market rates. Gyler said he is charging the highest Section 8 rents in Jefferson Parish, \$950 for a two-bedroom unit and \$750 for one bedroom.

Roberts is opposed to adding more Section 8 renters on the West Bank. Federal subsidies to Jefferson Parish for affordable housing provide vouchers to about

1,600 Section 8 renters. More than 1,400 or about 88 percent live on the West Bank, he said.

"I will tell you that concentration of Section 8 in my opinion is not good," Roberts said. "And the way that the Section 8 program has been run, I'm not in favor of bringing any more Section 8 vouchers into Terrytown. The program is broke. Criminals and drug dealers are abusing the program.

"Our experience in Jefferson Parish clearly shows that clustered multifamily housing for the most part has not been managed properly, usually leads to blight, has a tremendous effect on school performance scores, crime and economic development."

Repairing multifamily housing was not a priority for the parish after Hurricane Katrina. Parish officials addressed damaged single-family homes, issuing citations to force owners to make repairs.

"We've been so focused on these single-family neighborhoods that we haven't written many violations on the multifamily yet," said Louis Savoye, parish code enforcement director. "The neighborhoods were the greatest concern at first."

Affordable housing advocates take issue with Jefferson Parish's stance on multifamily housing, saying it makes no sense to let damaged apartments continue to fall apart.

"I think it's a horrible approach. To let the properties rot is to lower the property values for everyone in Jefferson Parish," said James Perry, executive director of the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center. "It's easier and cheaper to redevelop what's existing."

Gyler said it would cost about \$100,000 per apartment to build a new complex from scratch, causing rents to skyrocket to pay for construction.

Instead of letting the private sector repair them, Roberts wants the parish to buy damaged apartments on the West Bank.

"We're going to actually try to buy some of those developments and tear them down," Roberts said. "I would prefer some of the multifamily housing units be removed and replaced with green space or another form of housing."•