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Public housing stimulus

Federal funding will help clear up a backlog of needs

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Good news for Sarasota's beleaguered stock of public housing: \$1.1 million in federal economic stimulus money is on the way.

City and county officials learned of the funding last week. It, as well as \$631,000 for Bradenton, is part of about \$4 billion in stimulus-related capital improvements for public housing nationwide.

Underfunded for decades, public housing has a large backlog of needs. The stimulus funds can be put to quick use addressing them, hastening economic recovery.

Sarasota's \$1.1 million is especially welcome because it comes at a time of rising joblessness, falling state and local tax revenues, and the redevelopment of northside public housing.

The center of that overhaul is the Janie Poe family housing complex. Once so blighted that it became the focus of a documentary film, it is being transformed into a mix of new subsidized and market-rate units. Construction on the first phase is two-thirds complete, according to Bill Russell, Sarasota Housing Authority's executive director.

Other Sarasota public housing complexes -- even older than the Janie Poe units -- are waiting for improvements, too.

The stimulus money is important in two respects: It puts people to work, and it preserves public housing -- an "essential part" of the nation's infrastructure, in the words of the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials (NAHRO).

Long before the recession, Sarasota and the nation were far short of sufficient public housing. Now, with millions more people losing their jobs and homes, low-income families need this tax-subsidized resource more than ever.

As NAHRO notes, the nation's public housing units serve more than 2 million people, at least half of them considered "extremely low income." Thousands more are on waiting lists for this assistance.

According to NAHRO:

"40 percent of public housing residents are children."

"Over half of the families living in public housing are headed by seniors or people with disabilities."

"More than half of current families have been living in public housing five years or less." Nearly a quarter "have lived in public housing less than one year."

To be sure, it takes more than subsidized housing to solve the problem of poverty, a condition that reflects many ills. But safe, decent public housing helps stabilize families as they address the roots of their -- and the nation's -- economic distress.

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