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Uphill battle: Housing cuts worry rehab leader

By: Abraham Tekippe **January 16, 2014**

Kevin Jackson

Kevin Jackson sees big challenges — and big opportunity — in the local housing market.

As the longtime executive director of the Chicago Rehab Network, a coalition of neighborhood- and community-based organizations that promote affordable housing in the city, Mr. Jackson, 57, has witnessed firsthand the effects of the housing bubble and foreclosure crisis that followed.

Last year, he was one of 20 people selected to serve on the steering committee for the city's latest **five-year housing plan,** which was introduced yesterday to the City Council for approval. Dubbed "Bouncing Back," the document seeks to increase the city's population and jump-start development in **neighborhoods hit hardest by the recession,** calling for the construction, rehabilitation and preservation of some 40,000 housing units.

Yet the plan's total funding, about $1.1 billion, is significantly less than the nearly $2 billion provided through the previous plan, an alarming gap at a time when neighborhoods need assistance the most, Mr. Jackson said.

"Clearly we need more focus on this housing agenda rather than retreating and putting less out there," he said.

A spokesman for the Department of Housing and Economic Development attributed the gap to reduced federal funding. Because the city has become more efficient with how it allocates resources, and because it has more leverage with tax credits, the cutback will have a "modest impact," allowing the city to produce approximately the same number of units as the previous plan, he said.

Mr. Jackson, a native of Ohio, holds bachelor's degrees in philosophy and psychology from Miami University there and a master's degree in policy education and evaluation from the University of Kentucky. Before taking on his current position in 1996, he held several community-based leadership roles, including executive director of United Neighborhood Organization Little Village, and spent four years in the Peace Corps doing work in the Philippines.

In a recent conversation with Crain's, Mr. Jackson discussed the new housing plan, the effects of the foreclosure crisis and some of the broader challenges facing Chicago's neighborhoods. Here are edited excerpts from that interview:

Crain's: How does this housing plan differ from its predecessors?

Mr. Jackson: This is the first plan of the five that shows a reduction in resources ... Since the first one, each one built and continued to grow a larger pie to respond to the housing needs for Chicago. Now what's noteworthy for us about this, and alarming, is that in 1990, 25 percent of Chicagoans were cost-burdened — that's spending more than 30 percent of your income to meet your housing need. Twenty years later, by 2010, the Census shows that fully 50 percent of Chicagoans are cost-burdened. So, our alarm is that clearly we need more focus on this housing agenda rather than retreating and putting less out there ... As it stands, the second draft of the five-year housing plan allocates $800 million less than the previous five years.

Do you think that the city and state and federal lawmakers have done enough to prevent or address the foreclosure crisis?

No, I do not think there's been enough done to address the crisis. When the previous five-year plan came out we were in the middle of this crisis. We were a part of that, and I think people all thought it, too, would pass — that it wouldn't be lasting to where we are coming into the year 2014. . . .We have this perfect storm happening where families are losing their homes, they need rental housing and rental housing costs are accelerating at a pace that people can't afford. So, there needs to be a response as opposed to thinking that it will just work its way through. We have an incredible mismatch between income and cost of housing today.

The foreclosure crisis has been the short-term problem, but how do you address decades of population decline in some neighborhoods?

I know when we've held our neighborhood meetings, repopulation becomes a real strong theme we hear from existing residents. There's talk about the continuum between disinvestment, population decline and then the rebirth of communities in terms of reinvestment. . . .We saw there were certainly policies that aided and abetted people moving out to suburbia (in past decades). . . .It was intentional strategies that created that environment and it's that same intentionality that needs to recreate the city's urban fabric in its neighborhoods today.

Have you seen encouraging signs in the way of recovery?

I think one of the things is that there's more people mindful of what's happening. I think there's a stronger call to try to prevent the bifurcation of neighborhood vs. the Loop. . . .Emanuel's come out to say he doesn't want to see the tale of two cities, so that awareness, I think, is important for the real estate market.

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