



PA wins national award for West Side, downtown program

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— An ambitious plan to rid Port Arthur neighborhoods of blight and return abandoned properties to the tax rolls has earned the city national accolades.

During the U.S. Conference of Mayors the city of Port Arthur was one of four municipalities recognized for joint partnerships with private industry to improve local communities.

Along with the legal firm of Linebarger Goggan Blair & Sampson LLP, the city received an outstanding achievement award for its program, “Turning Disaster into Development: Port Arthur’s Recovery Following Hurricane Ike.”

Port Arthur was recognized for utilizing Neighborhood Stabilization Program grant funds to tear down abandoned or dilapidated structures in the city’s West Side and downtown areas. Many of the structures were left uninhabitable by Hurricane Ike. Others were completely destroyed with nothing but a vacant lot left, Steve Fitzgibbons, city manager, said in a telephone conversation Monday.

Mayor Deloris “Bobbie” Prince and Clayton Mayfield, managing attorney with Linebarger Goggan Blair and Sampson’s Beaumont office accepted the award Friday during a luncheon in Washington, D.C.

“I was really happy to represent the city of Port Arthur with this award,” Prince said. “We’ve had people working extremely hard on this. It shows what can be accomplished by working together.”

Linebarger is the legal firm that collects delinquent taxes for Jefferson County. In its partnership role with Port Arthur the firm waived legal fees to help the city tear down dilapidated buildings with the goal of redevelopment, and getting the property back on tax rolls.

To date, the city has received about \$1.5 million in NSP funds which have been used to tear down dilapidated buildings with more than five consecutive years owed in back taxes. Once torn down, the city puts a lien on the property and seizes it if the owner has no interest in paying the back taxes and cost of demolition.

Once seized and demolished, the city can sell the property to developers, or to neighbors who plan to build on the vacant lots.

“Most of the times there are also health and safety violations on these properties too,” Mayfield said in a telephone interview Monday.

Utilizing NSP funding, the city has purchased the bulk of the property, often replatting smaller lots to make the property more desirable for building.

Mayfield said people were squatting in some of the structures — sometimes stretching extension cords to another nearby house for electricity.

Mayfield said his firm represents cities all over the U.S. The firm has won the award before for partnerships with much larger cities such as Dallas and Houston. This is the first time they have applied for a project in Jefferson County.

Cities as far away as Puerto Rico have won the prestigious award before, Mayfield said.

“Cities all over the nation put in their applications. If you are blessed, you win,” he said. “A lot of times people think you have to have a mega project using \$15 million to \$20 million dollars. You just have to create a project that is doing something that is going to help people, or change the city.”

Prince said the project would not have been possible without the combined efforts of many entities including Linebarger representatives as well as numerous city and county officials, among others.

“This award has great significance because it shows what partnering with others can do,” Prince said.

Mike Mason, Port Arthur director of housing and neighborhood revitalization, said the city is expected to end up with 214 properties in the targeted areas.

NSP funds were released last week, he said.

The city is in the process of working with the Port Arthur Housing Authority, are in the closing process on many of the properties, and are waiting to start building.

The Neighborhood Stabilization Program was established for the purpose of stabilizing communities that have suffered from foreclosures and abandonment. Funding is made available from the Housing and Recovery Act of 2008 and administered by through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Also recognized was Award of Excellence Winner: Chicago, Ill. and Sprint Nextel for “Smart Communications Broadband Adoption Program.

Other Outstanding Achievement winners were Sacramento, Calif., and Nehemia Corporation of America for the “Township Nine” program and Schenectady, New York and Veolia Water North America for the “Schenectady, New York” project.