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Housing renovation projects get more money

By [Vianna Davila](#)
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The Rev. Brian Christopher of Guadalupe Catholic Church fires up the crowd during the Communities Organized for Public Service/Metro Alliance 2017 Accountability Session at St. Henry's Catholic Church April 24, 2017. San Antonio mayoral and City Council candidates were invited to the event to address questions about housing, immigration and economic security. About 750 members attended the event. (Photo: Jerry Lara/SAEN)

The City Council voted Thursday to increase funding to help homeowners rehabilitate their properties, even as federal dollars for such housing programs continues to ebb.

Most of the money comes from an existing fund balance for affordable housing. That money, combined with new federal dollars in the upcoming budget, will allow the city to rehab up to 81 homes in fiscal year 2018, compared with 25 in the current fiscal year, Deputy City Manager Peter Zaroni said.

However, city officials acknowledged that improving this many homes will be a challenge because contractors often find it difficult to work under strict federal funding guidelines associated with grants that pay for the programs.

In all, the council voted on how to allocate \$19.5 million to the four so-called federal entitlement programs funded by the U.S. Housing and Urban Development Department: the Community Development Block Grant program, or CDBG; the Home Investment Partnerships Program, or HOME; the Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS grant, known as HOPWA; and the HEARTH Emergency Solutions Grants, called ESG, for programs aiding people who are homeless.

Those programs, together, fund things such as facade improvement, construction of new homes by nonprofit developers, rapid rehousing for people who are homeless and rental assistance. The bulk of the CDBG funds, about \$4.8 million, goes to the ongoing payment of a \$57 million HUD loan the city took out in 2006.

The vote was unanimous except for District 8 Councilman Manny Pelaez, who recused himself.

In the upcoming budget, \$1.8 million will be set aside for single-family home rehabilitation, coming from CDBG and HOME funds. An additional \$4.9 million, left over from previous years' HOME and CDBG funding, has brought the total for owner-occupied housing renovations to \$6.5 million — an amount that should fund the 81 homes, Zanoni said.

The decision to increase funding for home renovations was cheered by members of COPS/Metro Alliance, a nonpartisan grass-roots coalition of community organizers.

“Today’s a historic day,” said Linda Ortega, COPS/Metro housing co-chair. The group is focusing on ensuring that residents can stay in their homes and find a way to maintain them. Alluding to the city’s focus on revitalizing downtown, Ortega said Thursday’s vote signals “the beginning of the ‘Decade of the Neighborhood.’”

For months, COPS/Metro has been pushing city leaders to increase funding for single-family home rehabilitation. In April, the organization held a public accountability session with several council candidates, including Mayor Ron Nirenberg, who was running for the office at the time.

Nirenberg and council members Roberto Treviño, William “Cruz” Shaw, Rebecca Viagran, Rey Saldaña, Shirley Gonzales and Ana Sandoval publicly committed to boost funding for rehabilitation, said Walker Moore, interim lead organizer for COPS/Metro.

Then-Mayor Ivy Taylor did not attend the accountability session, nor would she make the same commitment — something COPS/Metro leaders said they made sure voters knew leading up to the spring city election.

Nirenberg acknowledged COPS/Metro’s work Thursday, saying the organization kept the council “true on a number of issues.” But he also noted the overwhelming need for even more affordable housing options in San Antonio, which is short at least 150,000 affordable units.

In May, voters approved a \$20 million affordable housing bond, but that is not expected to completely address the need.

The next challenge for the city is revving up its rehab program: The city often struggles to find reputable contractors who will work at a reasonable price on smaller, owner-occupied housing rehab projects. Also, HUD will reimburse a contractor only after a project is finished.

Zanoni and the city's new Neighborhood and Housing Services Department director, Veronica R. Soto, said staff are working to improve the city's hiring process to get more contractors in the pipeline.

The funding for all four housing programs is 15 percent lower when compared with last year's funding levels, reflecting a decadelong trend of reduced federal dollars for the four HUD initiatives.

President Donald Trump has said he wants to cut funding to the entitlement programs altogether in next year's federal budget. Congress, so far, has pushed back against those cuts; regardless, the president's proposed budget won't affect San Antonio's FY 2018 funding, Zanoni said.

The battle over affordable housing also continues locally: On Thursday, after the vote on the entitlement programs, the council voted to allow the San Antonio Housing Trust to allocate \$35 million in multifamily housing revenue bonds for a 296-unit affordable apartment complex on Bandera Road in District 7. The complex is against the wishes of some residents living in the surrounding Northwest Side neighborhoods.

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