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New city housing leader can build on successes

By **DAVID MINCBERG**
HOUSTON CHRONICLE
Sept. 24, 2010, 7:56PM

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Houston, with its reputation as a city of opportunity, continues to attract a large number of new residents during both robust and lagging economic periods. According to planning experts, our city is expected to add another 1 million residents in the next 20 years.

As Houston continues this growth, faster than almost all other major cities, the housing and support services infrastructure will need to change, especially in our core city areas. And we need strong, visionary and experienced leadership at the Houston Housing Authority to accomplish this.

The Houston Housing Authority currently serves about 20,000 low-income families — nearly 55,000 Houstonians. In addition, the number of Houston families on the HHA waiting lists for housing has reached record levels during this weak economy, with more than 30,000 people waiting up to 10 years. The HHA must find innovative solutions to help solve Houston's lack of affordable housing by continuing to efficiently spend federal funds and encourage additional

private-sector involvement. The entire city - not just low-income residents - will benefit.

At a time when the resources of the Houston Housing Authority are needed more than ever in Houston, the authority's board of commissioners has begun a nationwide search for a new HHA leader. While the board conducts this search, former commissioner and board chair Tim Seckinger has been appointed as the agency's interim president and CEO. The city is fortunate to have an experienced leader at HHA during this transition period. He replaces Ernie Etuk, who recently retired after a successful 10-year tenure as president and CEO.

In addition to managing the HHA with efficiency and transparency, the new leader will be working with all levels of government, local public agencies and the private sector to serve the community effectively while being a good steward of taxpayer dollars.

That will include developing strong relationships with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and local government, business and community leaders.

Under new leadership and working with public-private partnerships, the HHA plans to develop and rebuild thousands of affordable housing units for the city's families, seniors and people with disabilities over the next 10 years, revitalizing and creating stable neighborhoods near public transportation, schools, and business and commercial centers. By efficiently spending available housing funds, we can draw additional investment from the private sector to some of our most distressed neighborhoods.

A good example of the kind of benefit to the city that can occur is the changes that have occurred in the Fourth Ward. In the late 1990s, this historic area was a neglected neighborhood. Today it is full of new homes where people of various income levels live side by side in the shadow of Houston's downtown office towers.

The Fourth Ward transformation did not happen in a vacuum. It was ignited when the Houston Housing Authority, tapping federal programs to fund the work and working with the city of Houston, rebuilt the once-bleak Allen Parkway Village. When it was completed, private investment and community stakeholders saw the opportunities of this transformation and continued the revitalization, bringing new homes and businesses into the community.

Developing more of these innovative and fiscally responsible solutions to Houston's affordable housing challenges, and the support services to help residents improve their lives, is the type of leadership that we know Houstonians want to continue to see. The new HHA leader will be carefully selected and will be expected to meet these vital needs of our community.

Working together with local leaders, this person will help us transform neighborhoods and improve the lives of thousands of Houstonians - and make Houston an even better place to live, work and play.

Mincberg is the chair of the Houston Housing Authority.

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