

Apartment demolition draws fire at the port

■ *The port wants to clear the property before the third runway is active, but low income housing advocates say the units are badly needed.*

By **MARGIE SLOVAN**
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Reverend Sandy Brown, executive director of the Church Council of Greater Seattle, told the Seattle Port Commission yesterday that its plan to tear down a low-income apartment complex near Sea-Tac Airport is "immoral."

The port purchased the 234-unit complex in Burien in 1998 because a small portion of it was in the "runway protection zone" of its planned third runway. No structures can be located in a runway protection zone, according to the Federal Aviation Administration.

The port wants to redevelop the property but does not have a developer yet.

When the runway was delayed, the King County Housing Authority asked the port if it could lease the complex and continue to operate it as housing.

"There are 8,000 homeless people in our community," Brown told the port commission yesterday. "Rental housing units are declining. The cost of homes is increasing."

Since 2000, KCHA has paid the port of Seattle about \$500,000 a year to lease the Lora Lake Apartments for low-income and Section 8 tenants. The agency has also paid the city of Burien about \$1.4 million in payments in lieu of taxes.

When KCHA leased the complex, it did extensive noise mitigation to make the units quieter, according to KCHA Executive Director Stephen Norman. KCHA would like to buy the complex from the port for fair market value.

Only 72 units of the complex are in the runway protection zone. The rest are outside and quiet enough to meet federal and local noise regulations. But airport spokesperson Terri-Ann Betancourt said, "The port and city agreed it wasn't appropriate for residential living."

Betancourt said the port is ready to put out a request for proposals. "It's drafted, ready to go."

The port was waiting for the Burien City Council to vote on the matter. On Monday, the Burien City Council voted 5 to 1 to demolish the complex. It is scheduled to happen in August.

Burien City Manager Mike Martin said most of the conversation at the city council meeting

Demolition

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“turned around the notion it is a very bad idea to put people 900 feet away from the center line of the runway.” The city of Burien has effectively rezoned 164 acres of land north of the airport for light industrial or retail uses, Martin said. Fifty five acres of that is port property.

The Lora Lake Apartments are physically cut off from the rest of the rezoned area by state Route 518, Norman pointed out.

There are still about 70 households left at the Lora Lake Apartments who have not yet been able to find a place to move. Many of them are on Section 8 vouchers, a KCHA spokesperson said.

Commissioner Alec Fiskén, who said he spent part of his weekend visiting the Lora Lake Apartments, urged his fellow port commissioners yesterday to delay demolition.

“I was unhappy with the decision of the Burien City Council,” Fiskén said.

But Fiskén did not get any support. Commissioner Pat Davis said the port should respect the land use goals of the city of Burien.

“I would propose we stick with it,” Davis said.

The port wants to clear the property before the runway is active, Betancourt said. “By next June we believe we’ll have planes at least testing on that runway.”

Commission President John Creighton volunteered that it’s not healthy for people to live near airports anyway.

“Does it make sense to consign families with children to an area that’s extremely noisy?” Creighton said.

Creighton said the port may give the KCHA about 100 mobile homes it has acquired near the airport.

But Norman said many of those mobile homes are in no condition to be moved.

“They’re fairly decrepit,” Norman said. “And we don’t have any land to put them on anyway.”

Brown of the Church Council told the port commission that at the very least, it should be a responsible developer and provide one-for one replacement of the low-income housing units that will be lost by tearing down the apartments.

“This is a legitimate public policy discussion,” added Norman, who voiced a similar opinion. “There’s a whole set of governments trying desperately to find money to build affordable housing and another governmental entity spending money to tear it down.”

“There needs to be a discussion on what is the best interests of the region,” Norman said.

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