

## **Once More Unto the Village, Dear Friends, Once More!**

On location with Henry G., Henry C. and Mayorbob

By Michael King

Allen Parkway Village, our local monument to social and political gridlock, was the subject of yet another public debate on December 4. This one was presided over by the grand old man of Texas progressive politics, Henry B. Gonzalez, the Democratic congressman from San Antonio. Gonzalez is chairman of the House Banking Committee's Subcommittee on Housing and Community Development; it was in this capacity that Gonzalez called this "field hearing" held in the community center of APV itself. The congressman was denied the venue in 1985, when he first came to investigate the Housing Authority of Houston's seeming inability to find useful ways to spend the \$8.5 million then appropriated to rehabilitate the World War II-era housing complex.

Some things have changed in eight years. This time, Gonzalez bemusedly pointed out, the Housing Authority (HACH) welcomed him to the Village, even providing transportation from the airport. And this time, there's nearly \$45 million in political limbo for public housing while the city, the federal government and, when permitted, the Village residents debate what to do about it.

Even the participants were uncertain why Gonzalez called the impromptu hearing at just this time -- several speakers on the two public panels were informed of the hearing only a few days before. The simplest theory offered was that "Congress is in recess, and that's when Gonzalez has the time." But according to the congressman's own written statement, the specific impetus was HUD's recent decision to approve an HACH plan for that \$45 million, supported by Mayor Bob Lanier. The city's plan calls for the renovation of 150 units, the demolition of almost all of the nearly 1,000 current apartments in the Village, "one-for-one" replacement public-housing units in "scattered sites" around Houston -- and the sale to private interests of most of the remaining land, for commercial development.

Gonzalez's statement, reiterated at the hearing, pointedly questioned the ability of the city and HACH to provide adequately the "one-for-one" replacement described in its plan, submitted and previously approved as a grant proposal for HUD's Urban Revitalization program. He also pointed out, in bold and intimidating capital letters, a more salient difficulty: The city's proposal is illegal. As Gonzalez put it:

THIS IS IN DIRECT CONTRAVENTION OF THE AMENDMENT THAT THE LATE REP. MICKEY LELAND (D-HOUSTON), REP. MARTIN FROST (D-HOUSTON) AND I PUT INTO LAW IN 1988 THAT SPECIFICALLY PROHIBITS THE USE OF ANY FEDERAL FUNDS IN ANY FISCAL YEAR TO DEMOLISH ALLEN PARKWAY VILLAGE.

Whatever force HUD's approval of the HACH plan had when it was given, it was scuttled by HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros before the hearing even began. Entering the Village grounds, Cisneros was surrounded by local TV crews eager to discover whether the photogenic secretary was running for the Senate (he said no). Cameras on him, Cisneros pulled Lanier aside to announce that in order to demonstrate "good faith" to all and sundry that there was no secret or sinister plan to allow public lands to be sold for private gain, he was asking the mayor to join him in a pledge not to sell "one square foot" of public land to private interests.

An obviously agitated Lanier didn't respond to Cisneros directly. When a reporter pointed out that Cisneros's newly announced vision of a redeveloped, entirely low-income residential Village made corned-beef hash of the mayor's standing proposal, Lanier said he wasn't tied to any particular plan but believed conditions at APV to be entirely unlivable.

While Cisneros and the mayor fended off the media swarm, a few feet away stood Gonzalez, speaking in Spanish to a lone reporter. A fan came up to have her picture taken; another, a big man in a cowboy hat, towered over the small, portly congressman and buttonholed him about some other big Houston scandal that needed the congressman's immediate attention. Gonzalez said he'd try to find the time.

Lanier was still unhappy. Moving toward the hearing room, he was confronted briefly by Sissy Farenthold about his plans for demolition. He didn't want to hear it. Referring to the run-down condition of the unmaintained (by HACH) APV apartments, he asked her, "Have you visited these places?... And you think this is a place for people to live? Oh, bullshit. That's bullshit!"

While not quite an anti-climax to the backstage maneuverings, the hearing itself predictably produced more heat than light. The mayor presented his proposal, but it had already been undercut by both the congressman and the secretary, and whatever the explicit outcome of the day's discussion, Lanier, HACH and HUD were clearly headed back to the drawing board. The mayor seemed as much dismayed as angry by the most recent turn of events, and argued plaintively that he was not to blame for the history of the current impasse. The audience was packed with media types, government-watchers and, most noisily, loud defenders of Allen Parkway Village -- who reacted with heckling and booing to any suggestion other than a complete rehabilitation of the original APV, exactly as constituted in 1944. I didn't detect much sympathy for the mayor's plight. He spoke explicitly as somebody who had "been in the business" of land development and insisted that his political interest was only to do "the most good for the most number of people" for the least amount of money.

Lanier insisted that he would implement any proposal that all the interested parties could agree on. He was certainly not alone in wondering if that day will ever come.

Cisneros was in a more interesting predicament. It did not appear that, when he grabbed ahold of Allen Parkway Village, he had realized the implacable nature of Houston's stickiest tar baby. Gonzalez was friendly but impatient with Cisneros's arguments that the "density" of the Village made the current configuration impractical. Gonzalez pointed out that APV contains 26 units per acre, while up the parkway a bit, luxury apartments were being built at 50 units per acre. Cisneros countered that many of the Village apartments -- built to absolutely minimal 1940s federal standards, including "ten-by-ten" bedrooms -- were simply too small. There he seemed to gain a bit of ground. Even Lenwood Johnson, speaking for the current Village residents, admitted that the size of many of the apartments is "not an ideal situation."

Cisneros remained vague about his still-brewing alternative plan. He talked of attempting to "construct a neighborhood" and mentioned a figure of possibly 500 surviving units (there are apparently 963, not a rounded "1,000," in the current Village), within a mixed-character plan of apartments, townhouses and single-family houses. The additional "hard unit replacements" (macho terms of bureaucratic art ran through the discussion) would of necessity be elsewhere in the city -- as in the current plan. That does not solve the problem of complying with the Leland Amendment, but Cisneros reiterated his pledge not to sell "one square foot" away from public housing -- a pledge which, if he will (or can) hold to it, will alter the character of the entire debate.

Following Lanier and Cisneros, the supporters of Allen Parkway Village in toto did not particularly distinguish themselves. All the old arguments -- public necessity, historical preservation, political shenanigans, corporate rapacity -- were repeated at great and enervating length, and there's no need to rehearse them (once again) in these pages. The decade-long impasse now seems to have frozen everyone in positions of absolute opposition, and the defenders of the Village seemed often to be insisting that it be restored exactly to its 1944 condition, without so much as an additional electrical outlet. It is also clear that they are so used to and abused by the mismanagement of the Housing Authority and the City of Houston -- over many decades of active and intentional disregard of the needs and opinions of the Villagers and the surrounding community -- that they may be forgiven for mistrusting HACH and the city to make good on paper promises.

The most curious presentation was that of Gladys House of the Freedman's Town Association. She spoke at length about the history of the neighborhood, dating back to the Camp Logan rebellion and before, and argued that its current decline came with the onset of "integration" -- by which she seemed to be describing land development, including the eminent-domain acquisition of Allen Parkway Village by Houston's powers-that-be. Unfortunately, this seemed to make nonsense of her praise of the Camp Logan heroes -- who fought to the death, after all, against the racism of Jim Crow segregation -- not to mention those who fought the civil-rights struggles in the years following the construction of the (then legally segregated) Allen Parkway Village.

That confusion aside, House closed her presentation by announcing that she was providing privately to the subcommittee and HUD evidence of a "letter of intent" to purchase the Village on the part of its residents, at the \$15 million announced value for the raw land. (Before the land can be sold, it must first be "offered" to the residents.) The money, said House, would be provided by an "out-of-state" financial backer. She offered no further details. Most particularly she did not suggest where, should such a purchase be made, the additional \$30 million might then be found -- the lowest estimate for rehabilitating the complex. Presumably federal money would not simply fall from the sky for what would magically have become a private housing project.

Lenwood Johnson fondly recalled at length his grandfather's counsel -- "Waste not, want not" -- and delicately backtracked from a National Housing Commission study in which he had participated, and which recommended against "high concentrations" of low-income housing. HACH is now beating him (and APV) over the head with that study, and he wants to distance himself from its findings. Johnson was not particularly eloquent, but he at least introduced a theme generally missing from the cacophony of number-crunching, density-mongering and expert witness-ing: "Democracy means you have a choice. Poor people need a choice."

There was a whole lot more, but frankly, little that we haven't heard already, nothing that we won't hear again. I asked one of the participants, architectural historian Stephen Fox, if he thought that the fight over Allen Parkway Village had become, over so many years, as much a symbolic battle as a real one. Fox answered, "The question is, which is the real Houston? Is it the Houston of downtown skyscrapers, or is it the Houston of historic low-income neighborhoods and low-income public housing? The type of morality play being enacted here is that the giants of downtown believe that it's their fate to do with the city as they please. The kind of concerted resistance that has occurred here for over ten years has inhibited that desire.... That really rankles the established interests in Houston."

Another participant, University of Houston social-work professor Robert Fisher, characterized Cisneros's pledge to retain all the Allen Parkway Village land for public housing -- if the pledge holds -- as a "major, major victory" for residents and their supporters. "If Lenwood Johnson was in eastern Europe -- if he was called "Lechwood Johnson" or "Boris Johnson," he would be a national hero. Because he's advocating grassroots democracy, because he wasn't giving in, he was struggling against the powers that be. We don't recognize him as a local hero. They've portrayed him as quite the opposite. But he was able here, with Henry Gonzalez's support and others' support, to hold on...."

Most notable in his absence from the Gonzalez hearing was the nominal representative of the Allen Parkway (18th congressional) district, Representative Craig Washington -- who has in the past said he no longer supports the Leland Amendment. Maybe Henry G. will change his mind too, as he appears to have changed, at least for the moment, that of Henry