

## Talk of merging Brooksville and Hernando County housing authorities rises again.

*Merger could finally resolve problem of abandoned low-income housing developments*

Tampa Bay Times, By Barbara Behrendt, bbehrendt@tampabay.com, (352) 848-1434 | Published April 3, 2019

BROOKSVILLE — Facing federal deadlines to unload its abandoned public housing units, an official with the Brooksville Housing Authority said this week that the agency has a plan.

Cliff Manuel, vice chairman of the Brooksville Housing Authority, told the Tampa Bay Times that he wants the agency to merge with the Hernando County Housing Authority, and he has applied for the open seat on its board.

The Brooksville authority wants to sell Hillside Estates, one of its two low-income developments, Manuel said, and use the proceeds to raze and rebuild Summit Villas, its other development.

Last month, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which oversees housing authorities, told the Brooksville authority to dispose of its long-abandoned housing units, perhaps by handing them over to the county housing authority.

*Previous coverage: Federal official tells Brooksville Housing Authority to dispose of properties and prepare to dissolve*

On March 22, the Brooksville authority ran a public notice seeking bidders on its Hillside Estates property.

The merger idea has come up several times, most recently in 2017 when federal officials asked the Hernando County authority to take over the Brooksville authority. HUD offered no funding, however, and the idea went nowhere.

*Previous coverage: Federal official asks Brooksville and Hernando housing authorities to merge*

Manuel said his board hasn't acted on any of the options yet. He thinks HUD should pay the Hernando County authority executive director Donald Singer to manage the Brooksville properties. Randy Woodruff, chairman of the Brooksville authority, could not be reached for comment.

Paul Sullivan, chairman of the county housing authority, said a merger would be the right thing but only under fair circumstances.

"It makes no sense to have two authorities," he said. "It makes sense to have one, but not if we're doing all of the work and they're getting all of the money," he said.

The Brooksville authority got an appraisal on Hillside Estates, a 52-unit development on 24.1 acres on Continental Drive. The advertisement seeking bids had an April 29 deadline.

The Brooksville authority has heard numerous pitches from potential developers over the years, including one from a veterans group and another from Habitat for Humanity of Hernando County. Habitat made a new pitch to the county authority last week, suggesting the nonprofit help to turn the concrete-block duplexes into homes owned by its clients.

In 2015, the city of Brooksville conducted a so-called brownfields study of Hillside Estates and found chemicals in the soil and asbestos in the buildings. Remediation would complicate any redevelopment.

Manuel said the Brooksville authority wants to sell Hillside Estates so it can redevelop Summit Villas, a three-building, single-story apartment complex on two acres on Dr. Martin Luther King Boulevard. The authority owns another acre alongside the development.



LUIS SANTANA | Times --Buildings that once housed low-income families in Brooksville at Hillside Estates have been abandoned for years. At the urging of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Brooksville Housing Authority recently advertised for proposals to take over the site.

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The Brooksville authority has discussed razing the existing structures, which also contain asbestos according to the city's environmental report, Manuel said, and building a facility like Magnolia Gardens, a Hernando County Housing Authority project opened on Barnett Road in Brooksville in 2012.

*Previous coverage: Magnolia Gardens earns water savers award*

Many of the elderly, low-income residents at Summit Villas went to Magnolia Gardens after Summit and Hillside closed seven years ago, Manuel said.

The units were closed because of their deteriorating condition.

In the years since, the Brooksville authority has continued to employ executive director Tommy Brooks and entertained a number of unsolicited proposals to redevelop the sites.

In its March letter, HUD told the Brooksville authority that Brooks' federally funded salary -- \$54,642 according to the authority's 2017 budget -- ends on May 31. The agency must present a plan for Summit Villas by April 30 and turn over both developments to a management company or the Hernando County Housing Authority by May 31.

Manuel said the agency's deadline is "too tight." He and his fellow Brooksville authority board members struggled to fix the troubled agency, he said, despite following every rule set by federal officials.

"It took forever to get clear communications back," Manuel said. "We were a lay board trying to deal with a very large organization in HUD and trying to make the right decisions, but stubbing our toes along the way."

The board discussed various options and proposals, Manuel said, but didn't have the knowledge or the ability to determine which were good offers. Instead, they sought the independent appraisal which now forms the basis for their request for bids.

Manuel said he hopes that good response to the request and a merger with the county authority finally will resolve the housing problems.



LUIS SANTANA | Times --What used to be Brooksville Housing Authority's Hillside Estates is now boarded up and abandoned.



LUIS SANTANA | Times --Brooksville Housing Authority's Summit Villas is boarded up and abandoned.