

ROMNEY CRITICS BLAST HIS VETO OF HOUSING AUTHORITY FUNDS

By Gintautas Dumcius
STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, AUG. 10, 2006...Public housing authority officials on Thursday decried Gov. Mitt Romney's veto yesterday of a 6 percent funding increase, threatening legal action and claiming the move will accelerate the deterioration of already neglected housing for some of the state's poorest residents.

"Conditions will worsen, repairs won't be able to be done, and over time, the lack of subsidy is going to undermine the asset," said Gregory Russ, executive director of the Cambridge Housing Authority, which oversees about 800 units of affordable housing. "I think this continues five years of being shortsighted about what it takes to run these assets. The governor's veto continues the starvation of these properties. You can't do that to an asset for very long before it falls apart."

Officials representing the state's 246 public housing authorities said they are hoping to tack the increase onto the list of items the Legislature could take up if they resume formal sessions this year.

Lawmakers earlier this year toured the state's \$8 billion stock in public housing with 50,000 units of affordable housing, saying they found frustrated tenants and local housing authorities complaining about losing units to disrepair and requests for emergency repairs going unanswered for months and years.

The bill (H 5243) Romney vetoed Wednesday would have allowed for public housing authority budget increases. Those budgets were capped in 2002, and authority representatives said the increase would give them flexibility to deal with ballooning utilities costs and repair and upgrade facilities.

"The governor was being fiscally responsible when he vetoed" the increase, said Phil Hailer, spokesman for the Department of Housing and Community Development.

State spending goes up every year and "we have to live within our means," he said, noting that New York is the only other state which offers state assisted public housing, and Massachusetts spends nearly \$100 million a year on public housing between the subsidies and capital improvements.

With state revenues hitting record levels, the Legislature has embarked on an effort to restore funds for programs and services cut following the recession of 2002. But Romney says the Legislature is repeating mistakes of the past by ratcheting up spending too much and too fast.

"I would say the governor's veto hurts the local officials' ability to carry out their responsibilities and it hurts low to moderate income citizens," said Sen. Brian Joyce (D-Milton), co-chair of the Joint Committee on Housing.

"We should be finding more ways to support them, not making it more difficult," said Rep. Kevin Honan (D-Boston), Joyce's House counterpart.

Asked whether the Legislature would consider overriding the veto, Joyce said, "Let's hope." He added: It's certainly something I'd like to have an opportunity to discuss with my colleagues and the Senate president."

Honan said, "It's hard to say," since the ball is currently in the Department of Housing and Community Development's court, because they have some flexibility with the \$3 million provided in subsidies.

"A lot of places aren't going to be able to occupy units and won't be able to house folks because they've been cut so far," said Thomas Connelly, executive director of Massachusetts chapter of the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials. "They're not just remaining viable anymore. The public housing program is going to come apart in Massachusetts."

Of \$10.7 million provided for public housing authorities in the deficiency budget earlier this summer, \$7.7 million will go towards a debt still owed to 73 local housing authorities from 2004 and 2005, which is "unprecedented" in the program's 50-year history, he said.

Three million in "unrestricted funds" could end up getting used for utilities, Connelly said.

Hailer said he couldn't comment where the \$3 million would be slotted towards, since that hasn't been determined yet.

"It's difficult and we understand what the housing authorities are going through," he said. "We sympathize with some of the housing authorities trying to make ends meet."

At the Boston Housing Authority, executive director Sandra Henriquez said, "I don't know where to begin. We are like every other housing authority: a fourth year of no growth."

When she first took the job as head of the authority, which oversees 2,700 state-assisted housing units, in 1996, she had 1,100 full-time employees. Now, she has 870, she said, and is considering more layoffs.

In an emailed legislative alert put out by Connelly today, he said a potential override of Romney's veto "should be easy" and said some housing authorities are considering legal action, adding: "There is also an election in only three months so folks will be sure to remember in November."

Housing authority officials were hesitant to comment on local housing authorities' threat to sue the state.

Henriquez said the local housing authorities, at budget hearings in past years, have expressed considering taking legal action to get funds they feel they legally deserve from the state, but declined to say whether they have had meetings with lawyers.

Honan said the situation for public housing authorities is "pretty dire," pointing to a report the Committee on Housing released two weeks ago. The report "makes a very strong case for the Commonwealth to step up to the plate and preserve these units," he said. "It's important that we as landlords keep this housing stock up to code."

Honan said he hopes the administration will be able to address the situation and prevent a lawsuit.

"That's an action people are sometimes forced to take when it gets truly desperate," he said.

Hailer said he was unaware of any potential lawsuit.

"We always work with the housing authorities and they're free to talk to us at any time," he said.