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EDITORIAL: Mr. Taffaro's mistake

Saturday, March 01, 2008

After spending taxpayers' money defending a discriminatory home-rental ordinance, St. Bernard Parish will shell out another \$32,500 to settle damage claims prompted by the law.

Yet Parish President Craig Taffaro apparently wants residents to focus on something else. "We settled without an admission of any wrongdoing," he said. "There was no finding of fault."

That does not mean the ordinance was not wrong. And President Taffaro can't expect residents to forget that the lawsuit -- and its costs to taxpayers -- came about because then-Councilman Taffaro conceived the discriminatory law and the council decided to waste public money defending it.

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The ordinance, which was approved in late 2006, required council permission for homeowners to rent to anyone who was not a blood relative of the owner -- making it extremely difficult for minorities to rent in an overwhelmingly white parish.

Then-Councilman Taffaro and other council members who voted for his proposal said they weren't seeking to discriminate, only to prevent an onslaught of cheap rentals after Katrina. Maintaining a high ratio of homeownership and well-maintained rental property are worthy goals, but most parishes accomplish them with other regulations. The effect of St. Bernard's ordinance was clearly discriminatory, and the New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center sued the parish.

The settlement calls for St. Bernard to pay \$20,000 to the housing action center and \$12,500 to a parish landowner who challenged the ordinance. These are modest sums as settlements go, but they are not the whole tab for parish taxpayers. It's not known how much St. Bernard spent on attorneys and other legal fees defending the suit, but it likely was thousands of dollars.

These expenses are an unnecessary burden for a parish in dire need of resources to rebuild after Katrina. This could all have been avoided if then-Councilman Taffaro and his colleagues on the council had admitted the flaws in their policy once protests arose. Instead, they did not delete the non-relative clause from the ordinance until after the suit was filed.

Even now, parish officials seem slow to learn from their past mistakes. The parish is still

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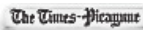
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requiring council approval for homeowners to rent homes that were not rentals before Katrina -- an infringement on property rights that could be challenged in court as well.

When housing action center attorneys this week said the group is watching rental permit decisions for signs of discrimination, President Taffaro responded that anyone who feels discriminated against now could sue in court.

The prudent response would be for President Taffaro to urge the current council to get rid of the remaining rental permit requirement and control any neglected rental property with other maintenance and zoning requirements as do most communities. That would once and for all end this episode -- and the potential for another costly lawsuit.

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