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Inland housing authorities lobby for share of economic stimulus package



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The Press-Enterprise

The Inland region's public housing authorities don't want to be left out of any future economic-stimulus plan.

Area officials are joining in a national effort to lobby Congress for as much as \$5 billion to help rebuild and renovate aging homes and apartments.

"We have public housing units that have been severely underfunded in prior years," said Susan Benner, executive director of San Bernardino County's housing authority.

"It is our hope they would put money into our industry."

There are more than 1,600 public housing units in San Bernardino County and more than \$55 million in backlogged improvement projects, Benner said.

Benner said the authority has plans to renovate units by making them more energy efficient. The work will create local jobs, she said.

Nationally, there is an estimated \$32 billion backlog of capital improvement projects in public housing, according to the Council of Large Public Housing Authorities, based in Washington, D.C.

The council wrote a letter to congressional leaders this month urging them to contribute \$5 billion to a capital fund overseen by the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The fund provides money to help local agencies across the nation develop and modernize public housing units, from single-family homes to apartments.

"This request is a timely, targeted and effective means to stimulate the local economies, create jobs, improve energy efficiency and preserve affordable rental housing for the nation's neediest," Michael Kelly, the council's president, said in a statement.

Housing authority officials want the money included in President-elect Barack Obama's plan to

stimulate the economy by rebuilding the nation's infrastructure.

Obama hasn't released details or a price tag on the plan, but the package could exceed \$400 billion. Lawmakers could take it up in January.

Riverside County's housing authority operates differently than the authority in San Bernardino County, but still owns 476 units in 22 buildings across the county.

"All are over 25 years of age and in need of rehab," Tom Freeman, a spokesman for the agency, said in an e-mail.

Revamping the units would give much-needed work to local contractors, he said.

Riverside County also has built more 1,700 housing units over the last nine years for low- and moderate-income residents, Freeman said. "It is our intention to build more of these with more money from the federal government," Freeman said by telephone.

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