Baton Rouge wins four HUD awards

Federal Housing and Urban Development Secretary Andrew Cuomo honored Baton Rouge with four John J. Gunther Blue Ribbon "Best Practices" Awards for outstanding management of programs funded by the federal agency.

Cuomo announced the awards to Baton Rouge at a meeting of the U.S. Conference of Mayors earlier this month in Reno, Nev.

The Gunther Awards honor state and local governments that do the best job administering HUD-funded programs to expand the supply of affordable housing, create jobs, strengthen local economies, fight housing discrimination and accomplish goals to improve life in America's communities.

"Baton Rouge is doing an excellent job working in partnership with HUD and can serve as a national model," Cuomo said. "We are calling attention to the good work Baton Rouge is doing because we want to help communities around the country learn from its success."

Baton Rouge was named a Gunther Award winner for creative and effective use of information technology.

The Office of Community and Economic Development developed a low-cost geographic information system. Community Development utilizes digital flood insurance maps through the geographic information system. These determine whether projects are in flood zones. The system also generates noise zones around railroads and the airport, locates thermal and blast hazards, and provides a satellite image layer that depicts the entire parish.

This system effectively illustrates the contrast of proposed projects, determines distances to public facilities and expands and corrects the street files provided by HUD.

In addition, properties adjudicated for nonpayment of taxes are mapped regularly, thereby making property location data available at a glance, HUD said.

The ability to locate properties suitable for redevelopment was a problem in the past. Adjudicated properties entered into the map database are conservatively estimated to be worth $63 million.

Baton Rouge received a second Gunther Award for innovative solutions to personnel management and staffing.

Community Development encouraged the hiring of local university students by using grants and federal work-study programs. Student workers saved the agency money while students earned valuable work experience.

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— Andrew Cuomo, HUD secretary

Baton Rouge received a third Gunther Award for its work with Mid-City Redevelopment Alliance and home ownership. Inner city, mixed neighborhoods are improving through community development programs, HUD said.

One major effort is Park Hills, an inner-city new housing development of 15 homes sponsored by the Mid-City Redevelopment Alliance.

In 1997, the first six homes were built entirely on speculation and a ribbon cutting was held. By year-end, there were purchase agreements on all six homes.

Plans are now in the making for construction of another group of homes, HUD said.

Baton Rouge received a fourth Gunther Award for outstanding work in the development of affordable housing through a fee building permit fee waiver system for the inner city.

It resulted in a marked increase in new housing construction in the target area. Non-profit organizations were able to accomplish one of HUD's primary objectives, to provide decent, safe and sanitary housing at affordable prices, since the fee waiver is a construction cost savings.

City-parish records show that before the waiver ordinance, 15 new, single-family housing permits were issued. The fee waiver period during 1996 and 1997 generated 48 new housing permits — an increase of 220 percent.

The total value of waived fees during the waiver period was $15,661. When a renewal ordinance was presented to the Metro Council, the waiver was unanimously extended for an additional two years.

The Gunther Awards, first given in June last year, are named for John J. Gunther, who was executive director of the U.S. Conference of Mayors from 1961-1987. He died last year.

Award winners were chosen by HUD program offices and field offices around the country.

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