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DOT plan to remove Government Hill homes sparks protest

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A site visit in Government Hill by contractors hoping to bid on the demolition of two homes and a former motel in the path of the proposed Knik Arm crossing was confronted Tuesday with a band of protesters hoping to leave the homes intact for now.

As the contractors gathered in the parking lot of the old Sourdough Inn, more than 50 Government Hill residents, community council leaders and other Anchorage community activists stood across the street, chanting and holding signs with slogans like "Haste makes waste" and "DOT = Home Wreckers."

Behind them stood two homes that, along with the motel, are slated for demolition or removal by November. The state bought the three structures to make way for the proposed, and still uncertain, Knik Arm bridge and access roads. The properties sit on top of land slated to be developed into a tunnel.

Longtime Government Hill resident Thomas Pease led a series of chants through a megaphone.

"What do we want?" "Homes!" "What do we need?" "Homes!"

Government Hill Community Council president Stephanie Kesler said neighbors and other advocates decided to resort to a protest after past methods of communicating appeared to fall on deaf ears.

The idea was to be polite and respectful while calling attention to the issue, she said.

On July 1, the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities took over the construction of the bridge. The department announced two days later it would start taking bids on the demolition or removal of two homes and the former Sourdough Inn in late July. The first site visit for potential bidders took place Tuesday.

While the neighborhood is not against the removal of the vacant former Sourdough Inn, which has been called a possible public nuisance, the prospect of losing the 1950s-era homes at 828 Erickson St. and 441 Harvard Ave. struck a nerve. Ann Reddig, who lives close by and attended the protest, echoed other neighbors when she said taking out the homes would leave "a huge hole" in Government Hill.

Amid a [housing shortage in Anchorage](#), the community council is arguing the homes should be used as rental properties until the bridge project secures a necessary low-interest loan from the Federal Highway Administration, a condition set this year by the Legislature for construction to proceed. The state began

submitting letters of interest in the loan five years ago, and per recently signed legislation, the state can't issue bonds to finance the bridge project without it.

In a media tour before the protest, Jill Reese, a DOT representative, acknowledged the project's timeline is "still up in the air." But, she added, the process of pre-acquiring properties in the course of a transportation project is business as usual for her department.

"You can't wait until you're ready with the financing to build the bridge," Reese said. "Especially in the Anchorage Bowl, prices aren't going down."

She stressed that the homes won't necessarily be demolished. The future contractor could choose to simply move the homes to a different lot, she said.

Reese said that of the three properties, the red house on Harvard Avenue was in the best shape.

"It has quite a bit of charm," she said. "I sincerely hope it gets moved and relocated to another lot."

Asked about the costs of fixing up the homes as rental properties, Reese said, "That's not our journey," citing stringent federal requirements it would have to follow to relocate the renters if the bridge is built.

But community council president Kesler said the idea of moving the homes elsewhere is "absurd."

"These homes belong in the neighborhood," she said.

A DOT engineer's estimate pegged the cost of demolishing or

removing the homes and motel at between \$500,000 and \$1 million.

The two homes and their land were valued at \$297,300 and \$402,100 in 2013, according to municipal property records.

One longtime Government Hill resident, Ron Clark, said he's comfortable with the idea of the homes being relocated, "as long as they're being used." But he and others present said they didn't want the bridge access to come through the neighborhood, if it were to be built at all.

Last week, Sen. Johnny Ellis and Rep. Les Gara, both Anchorage Democrats, sent a letter to Alaska Transportation Commissioner Patrick Kemp asking that the department not spend state money to demolish the properties until the bridge financing is in place. Gara said at the rally Tuesday he had not yet received a response.

Marjorie Ellis, 96, sat in a chair at the protest Tuesday, wearing a purple cap. Afterward, she called the bridge a "sword of Damocles" hanging over her head.

In 1951, she said, she started building her home on Ash Street in Government Hill with her own hands. If the bridge project progresses to its second phase, her house would be slated for demolition or removal.

"You just wonder what's going to happen next," she said.

The state has set a July 25 deadline for bids on the demolition or removal of the structures.

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