**Faith Coalition calls for immediate appointment of rail ombudsman**

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A Springfield community group has asked for immediate appointment of a railroad relocation ombudsman that's been held up by the state budget deadlock.

The Faith Coalition for the Common Good released an open letter Wednesday to Illinois Department of Transportation Secretary Randy Blankenhorn calling on the state to keep its commitment to fund an ombudsman to represent property owners during land acquisition. The first ombudsman, retired Judge Theodis Lewis, resigned in April after the state failed to complete a contract and to reimburse him for expenses.

Lewis was on the job less than a year.

"We were told because of the state budget, they cannot sign a contract," said Shelly Heideman, executive director of the Faith Coalition.

Springfield resident Eve Blackwell-Lewis has been selected as Lewis' successor, Heideman said, adding that there's little she can do without the state funding.

"She has attended a few meetings," Heideman said, "but she does not have a contract."

Heideman said offers already have been made to homeowners and renters for the next phase of rail relocation construction, which includes underpasses at Ash and Laurel streets.

"We find that unacceptable," Heideman said. "We want to let them know how they deserve a fair price, and they do not have to jump at the first offer."

She also pointed out that a rail community benefits agreement with the state and city includes an ombudsman.

The letter to Blankenhorn from the Rev. T. Ray McJunkins of the Faith Coalition asked that Blackwell-Lewis be given an immediate contract and that IDOT and Sangamon County work out the funding.

"The Rail Community Benefits Agreement specifically states that the ombudsman would be hired to ensure fair and equal treatment to homeowners and renters," McJunkins wrote.

McJunkins suggested that Sangamon County could pay for the ombudsman up front. The county would then be reimbursed once a state budget is approved. The state has been without a spending plan since the fiscal year started July 1.

Hanson Professional Services is overseeing land acquisition on behalf of the city of Springfield through a rail relocation consulting contract. Federal rules govern the acquisition process, including independent appraisals, negotiations and relocation assistance. Planners estimate that 50 homes, businesses and lots will be needed for the next phase of construction.

Dennis Hollahan, who is managing the land-acquisition process for Hanson, said Wednesday that offers have been made to some property owners, but no purchases have been completed.

"We've completed appraisals on some properties and are continuing appraisals on others," Hollahan said.

The long-term goal of railroad relocation is to move Third Street train traffic to the 10th Street corridor. The first underpass, at Carpenter Street between 11th and Ninth streets, is scheduled for completion in 2016. Rail relocation planners estimate that the entire project will take at least 10 years and $315 million to complete.

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