

Housing Authority of the City of Laredo
Special Board of Commissioners Meeting
LHA Conference Room
2000 San Francisco Ave.
Laredo, Texas 78040
Friday, January 19, 2018
3:00 p.m.

A-18-S-1

Minutes

January 19, 2018

1. **CALL TO ORDER** Chairman Ceballos called the meeting to order at 3:11 p.m. and thanked everybody for making time and being present on a Friday, the Commissioners, staff, and the Attorneys.
2. **PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE** Chairman Ceballos led them in the recital of the pledge.
3. **ROLL CALL AND DECLARATION OF QUORUM** Melissa Ortiz, Acting/Interim Executive Director, proceeded with roll call.

Commissioners Present

Jose L. Ceballos, Chairman
Dr. Sergio Garza, Vice-Chairman
Anita Guerra, Commissioner
Marcela Alvarez, Commissioner
Dr. Marisela Rodríguez, Commissioner

Commissioners Absent

Staff Present

Melissa Ortiz, Acting/Interim Executive Director
Christy Ramos, Administrative Assistant
Bulmaro Cruz, Director of Modernization and Development
Alfonso Treviño, CFP Coordinator
Jessica Martinez, Community Programs Coordinator
Jennifer Barrientos, Interim Director of Finance
Jose Collazo, Special Projects Coordinator
Alina Rios, Quality Control
Maria De Lourdes Hernandez, Procurement Officer Assistant
Mary De La Rosa, Interim Human Resources Assistant
Frank Lopez, Procurement Officer
Roberto Peña, IT Coordinator
Rafael Vidaurri III, Director of Housing Management
Leticia Sosa, Office Clerk
Bertha Galvan, Interim Section 8 Administrator

Others Present

Orlando Guerrero

4. CITIZENS COMMENTS

This is the opportunity for visitors and guests to address the Board of Commissioners on any issue. The Board may not discuss any presented issue, nor may any action be taken on any issues at this time. There will be a 3-minute limitation per speaker. (Texas Attorney General Opinion-JC-0169)

Mr. Orlando Guerrero addressed the Board of Commissioners and stated that he used to work at LHA and mentioned that he had come personally to express his interest on applying for employment, that he had noticed LHA needed a Chief Accountant and that he knew Mr. Del Barrio was no longer with LHA, so he just wanted to come and personally turn in his application and to let the Commissioners and Ms. Ortiz know that he was interested in any of the two positions.

Chairman Ceballos thanked Mr. Orlando Guerrero and mentioned that Mr. Guerrero could direct the information to him and asked if anybody else had a comment. There being none Chairman Ceballos proceeded with Item 5.

5. DISCUSSION ITEM (Public Portion of the Interview; No Action to be taken)

- A.** Discussion related to Executive Director search, recruitment and employment/contract.

Chairman Ceballos mentioned that the item for discussion was related to the Executive Director's search, recruitment and employment contract. He stated that Ms. Gaona was present and would be interviewed for the job. They would do it with two formats in place; they would do a public interview and would like to keep track of it and would spend as much time as they would need because he wanted to have some public discourse with Ms. Gaona and then they would go into Executive Session. Chairman Ceballos asked Attorney Poneck to be the time keeper because he did not want to spend more than 30 minutes in public session unless the Board would feel it to be important that they would continue, so Chairman Ceballos invited Ms. Gaona to the podium and stated that he noticed she was probably nervous, but he wanted to have a conversation and would like for her to relax and added that she was in a group of folks that were supportive and to tell them first about her interest in serving at LHA and also about her capabilities if she had reached the level of interest for LHA. Chairman Ceballos stated that he wanted to make sure she understood that she already had a level of confidence to get to that point.

Chairman Ceballos stated that he had a few questions and understood Vice-Chairman Dr. Garza had at least one question that he would like to ask publicly and if Ms. Gaona would decide there would be some things better discussed in

Executive Session, just to tell it the way she would want to say it in public and then they could follow up anything that she or anybody else would feel needed to be discussed in Executive Session for privacy reasons.

Chairman Ceballos mentioned that most people in the room knew Ms. Gaona, that probably the Commissioners knew her the least and that there were some new staff, that they invited all the Management staff to be present, not the Public Housing Managers, but everybody else. Chairman Ceballos stated that the public portion was both, for the record, as an interview and also that staff could listen and be encouraged by the conversation, so Chairman Ceballos asked Ms. Gaona to tell them about herself, anything she would like to share about her person and most importantly about her career. Chairman Ceballos mentioned that he and Vice-Chairman Dr. Garza already knew a little about Ms. Gaona's background, but maybe she could start from how she got to work in LHA, which would be the first question for her.

Ms. Gaona stated that currently she was the Executive Director at Bethany House and has been there for the past four years as staff and one year as contract service. She mentioned that she was currently the Executive Director, but had started as a bookkeeper and said she would usually tend to navigate towards financial areas because it was her strongest point. She stated that it was close to 20 years that she had been at LHA and had started as a finance clerk and that her decision to be with LHA was to grow, to develop, to learn and she said she did because she had great leaders that taught her a lot during those 20 years. She stated that towards the end of her career at LHA it was a difficult and challenging time for all not just for herself, she felt that it was a particular time when management and the leadership was not taking them in the direction that she felt they needed to go which made her decision to exit in 2012.

Chairman Ceballos asked Ms. Gaona what was her interest in returning to LHA. Ms. Gaona responded that after leaving in 2012 and going to Bethany House, it had been a great opportunity for her to see the different needs in the community. She stated that sometimes at LHA they were like in a box doing what they needed to do, accomplishing the goals and trying to be at the level needed to get the scores to be high performers, but she said that the need in the community was greater and therefore, she would like to come back and be able to make a difference, take the Agency where it needed to go and bring it back to the level of performance that it would need to be.

Chairman Ceballos asked Ms. Gaona where, specifically, would she like to take the Agency, what her vision would be and to expand on it. Ms. Gaona responded that she would like to grow in affordable housing, to be able to develop more housing projects, more affordable mix of projects and to be able to implement programs where they could navigate families currently in Public Housing into homeownership because they would really need to turn the units around. Chairman Ceballos asked that coming back from an outside perspective, what

would she expect to be the biggest challenge. Ms. Gaona responded that it would be learning where the staff would want to go, getting the staff to go where the vision of the Commissioners and the community was and be able to have them follow in that journey, coming back and learning where they were five years ago when she left and learning where they would be now.

Vice-Chairman Dr. Garza mentioned that Ms. Gaona had made a comment that when she left it was a difficult challenging time and the leadership in management was not taking them in the direction they needed to go, obviously when she left there were challenges and Vice-Chairman Dr. Garza could see that she would want the staff to grow, and that it would be what the Commissioners and Ms. Ortiz know, that they need strong employees and do what they would have to do, run with the ball and make a touchdown, so Vice-Chairman Dr. Garza's question would be about how she would empower the staff if she were to return knowing what she knew. Ms. Gaona responded that she was coming from a strong background where they have a good work ethic and she would lead by example and of course she would need for the staff to be willing to work as a team, to grow and be positive about what they would be doing and that in order to perform a job, they would need to love what they would be doing, if not, they would not be able to perform it and if they would not understand it, then they would learn it together; if she would not know it, they would learn it together. She said it would be like looking out for them to learn and educate themselves on how to perform the job that they were tasked to do and for them to feel confident that they would perform the job.

Vice-Chairman Dr. Garza mentioned that those who worked in some capacity of leadership would say it would be a perfect society when everybody would work well with everybody and would cooperate and would do what they would need to do, but unfortunately once in a while someone would not want to be part of the team or they would not really want to cooperate, so if someone would not want to cooperate with her, how would she get them to cooperate with her and that it would be very important to conglomerate, where everybody as a tight family would support each other; therefore, Vice-Chairman Dr. Garza asked Ms. Gaona what would she do if a particular employee would not really want to work with her or the staff, how would she handle it. Ms. Gaona responded that she would have a one to one discussion with the employee and develop a plan that would need to be accomplished and if they would not succeed accomplishing the plan, they would have to go to the personnel policies and will follow what the personnel policies would dictate and then it would be his or her decision as to whether she or he would follow the policies, would jump on board and would become a team player or they would have to move on and it would be a decision that them as a group would make, that it would not be a decision she would make on her own, but it would be a team decision. Vice-Chairman Dr. Garza asked at what point would she inform the Board about it. Ms. Gaona responded that it would probably be after the second write up, before they would get to the third. Vice-Chairman Dr. Garza thanked Ms. Gaona.

Chairman Ceballos asked Commissioner Dr. Marisela Rodriguez if she had any questions. Commissioner Dr. Marisela Rodriguez stated that she was a firm believer of innovation and changing certain things around and as far as change, there are struggles in leadership, so she asked how Ms. Gaona would change or transform since she thought Ms. Gaona had an understanding of transformation, what would be her specific strategies and tactics on how to change a culture of an agency that would be resistant to change. Ms. Gaona responded that it would take trying, and trying, and trying, but eventually them as a group, the Commissioners and herself, once she would learn the path they would want to take, would be able to bring everybody on board and would try to teach them and educate them on the different directions they would want to take. Ms. Gaona mentioned that it would be hard in every leadership position. She said she knew some of the old staff, but did not know where they were at that point and it would be a learning experience meeting with them to know where they would be currently and then to see where they would go from there. Commissioner Dr. Marisela Rodriguez thanked Ms. Gaona.

Chairman Ceballos asked if there were any more questions. Commissioner Anita Guerra mentioned that they would want to have a succession plan for a transition. Ms. Gaona mentioned that she believed that they would need to have staff that would be capable to fill in and also that she believed in cross training everybody, so that when somebody would leave, somebody would need to be prepared to fill in that gap. She said one of the first things she would need to work would be in developing the administrative team because they would not know whether they would be here tomorrow, so a plan would need to be ready to have someone that would be capable to fill in the shoes. Commissioner Anita Guerra stated that Ms. Gaona would be willing to have a concrete plan of certain people ready in case one person would decide to move. Ms. Gaona confirmed.

The second question Commissioner Anita Guerra had was in regards to the situation with the Director of Finance and the significant deficiencies they had, although they were aware that HUD was not one of the easiest agencies to work with, so Commissioner Anita Guerra asked Ms. Gaona how she would work with the vendors, the staff and the independent auditor to make sure those deficiencies would not happen again, because it would be very important to know how she would address those deficiencies. Ms. Gaona responded that it would be the first thing she would look at by addressing it with the auditors and the staff to see where the weakness was and where it was that they did not catch it and then making sure it would not occur again and she said that all it would take would be knowing how to work with HUD.

Ms. Gaona stated that she had worked with HUD during those 20 years with LHA and that it would take to build the rapport and the relationship with them and said that HUD accounting was not just basic accounting, that it had its own dynamics and that once you had done it, you would be able to handle it, so it would take working with the accountants, with HUD, and with the staff. Commissioner Anita

Guerra mentioned that one of the issues was the reconciliation on a monthly basis and asked how they were doing it during Ms. Gaona's previous tenure or if they would do it differently with her current organization. Ms. Gaona responded that she could not tell her how it was currently done at LHA, but the way it was done before, it was common practice to reconcile both monthly.

Commissioner Marcela Alvarez asked Ms. Gaona to tell her about her proudest achievement. Ms. Gaona responded that it was her two boys, that they were her pride and joy. The final question for Ms. Gaona was to list five words that would describe her character. Ms. Gaona's response was honest, dependable, hard worker, having a big heart. Commissioner Alvarez stated Ms. Gaona had said enough. Vice-Chairman Dr. Garza mentioned about being passionate and Ms. Gaona responded that she is very passionate about what she did.

Chairman Ceballos stated that he would make some comments after they would come out of Executive Session because it could take him about 20 minutes, but that some of the things everybody highlighted really reflected a culture and said that they were seeing it in the discourse that Commissioners knew it did not happen before and they did not know it, but they had changed the culture of how they operated the Board, that they used to meet in a half hazard room that barely fit people, so he said there had been a team, that they had not done it themselves, that they just had allowed staff to do it and a lot of people had done it and were very proud and said that it was just a building and that what had happened over time was that they had locked themselves in and now Ms. Gaona had to see it after being gone five years. Chairman Ceballos mentioned that it would be important if Ms. Gaona would get selected that she would not forget that and stated that the culture to him was probably the biggest inhibitor, which was why people left and why people felt unhappy.

Chairman Ceballos asked if there were any more questions before going into Executive Session to continue the interview. There were none.

Chairman Ceballos moved to go into Executive Session.

Vice-Chairman Dr. Garza seconded the motion.

Motion passed unanimously.

6. EXECUTIVE CLOSED SESSION IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE TEXAS GOVERNMENT CODE

The Board of Commissioners for the Housing Authority of the City of Laredo reserve the right to adjourn into Executive Closed Session at any time during the course of this meeting to discuss any of the matters listed on the posted agenda, above, as authorized by the Texas Government Code, including Sections 551.071 (consultation with attorneys), 551.072 (deliberations about real property), 551.073 (deliberations about gifts and donations), 551.074 (personnel matters), 551.076 (deliberations about security devices), and 551.086 (economic development).

- A. Discussion related to Executive Director search, recruitment and employment/contract.**

Chairman Ceballos called all the Board of Commissioners, Attorney Ricardo De Anda, Attorney Doug Poneck, and Ms. Mary Gaona to enter into Executive Session.

The Board entered into Executive Session at 3:32 p.m.

The Board reconvened from Executive Session at 4:50 p.m.

No action was taken in Executive Session.

7. ACTION ON CLOSED SESSION ITEM

Commissioner Dr. Marisela Rodriguez moved to approve employing Mary Gaona as the Laredo Housing Authority Executive Director effective February 5, 2018 according to the terms as discussed in closed session to be reduced to writing in a contract.

Commissioner Anita Guerra seconded the motion.

Motion passed unanimously.

Chairman Ceballos mentioned that he wanted to make some remarks and stated that it had been some time since they had posted the position and that they had started the search on April of 2017, that they had approximately 20 completed applications and 40 plus incomplete applications and that a lot of the applicants, unfortunately, did not have the background and although there were a few qualified, it had really been a very trying exercise for everybody and he wanted the record to reflect that for posterity. Chairman Ceballos stated that it was important as they set forward the path for the Agency that everybody would understand and that it would be clear for both the public and staff, and also for Ms. Gaona, how important some things were in any organization, but particularly at LHA given the last couple years, what they had found with the current Board and others and also with the staff that had held the fort and done a lot of good work, was that they learned that they could move forward even when they had some troubles in their past and that when they talked earlier in the meeting about philosophy, they would need to look forward and establish where they would be going and make decisions based on where they would want to get; they could always remember the past, but would need to set a path forward to make decisions that way.

Chairman Ceballos stated that for him what was important was the baseline of Public Housing in using federal funds was good, but it was the base line and he wanted everybody in management that was present to understand that the baseline was really the beginning, that they could do more, and that there were very few jobs where they could make an impact on human beings the way they had the opportunity at LHA and never to think less for whatever reasons, whether it would be because of a troubled past or whatever it would be, the ability to impact people as the Housing Authority did was very unique, that there were very few organizations and unfortunately they had not created that projection, but they were all working on it together and in the community eventually in time they would be in a place where folks would recognize it. Chairman Ceballos mentioned that he thought the path forward would be to understand not to live in the baseline, that the federal government should not be the one to dictate a community's progress, that it should be all of them as a community.

Chairman Ceballos recommended for staff to communicate, to be open and transparent, to share mutual respect with each other as they would work forward, and mentioned that they would have a leader coming back that was not foreign to all and to those that were new, they would have an opportunity to work with her. Chairman Ceballos stressed that staff should always have respect for each other which would be extremely important because when they do not disrespect someone, they could always come back from a decision or a mistake, but once they would lose respect, it would add additional work for each of them, so he recommended them to train themselves to listen, and as they would read everywhere, listen to understand, also to try not to reply, to always remember that and to speak honestly. Another recommendation was that they needed to make sure that anything they would spend time on as they would reorganize and would do things better, would be to set them in a way that could be measured and to avail themselves for training, as busy as they could be, and to make sure that they would always be in the path to grow which would be the only way to tell people that they had succeeded because if they would not measure something, they would always be lost in the cloud of hard work.

The mission statement, Chairman Ceballos mentioned, had taken a lot of work, and a lot of them had helped, that serving, collaborating, empowering and everything they had discussed at the meeting was exactly that they were at LHA to serve, collaborate and empower and that they were at LHA for a season, for a little while, that none of them would be there forever, so it was important for them that the message would be to look to the future together and in a way that would be measurable and that it would not be confined in the federal box, that they would meet that threshold, but would need to look beyond that, so Chairman Ceballos stated that those were his comments and asked if anybody else wanted to make any additional comments.

Vice-Chairman Dr. Garza congratulated Ms. Gaona and also thanked Ms. Ortiz for helping at a time when they needed someone to help and also for helping him when he had come on board and would come to Ms. Ortiz for help, so he was very thankful to Ms. Ortiz for helping him and the Board.

Commissioner Anita Guerra also thanked Ms. Gaona and the staff including Ms. Ortiz for all she had done in the past, and she also thanked the lawyers.

Chairman Ceballos mentioned that Ms. Ortiz had held the fort and had never said she could not make it to a meeting and the roles she had played had been critical and that he had mentioned it to her just the previous week when they met that she had never once told him she could not do something or could not be at a meeting, so Chairman Ceballos stated that Ms. Ortiz deserved a lot of credit for keeping the organization in place and probably the most challenging time was Russell Terrace with some much confusion at the beginning and then a lot of work by pulling together everybody that helped, Alma, Bulmaro, Jennifer, everybody that had been involved and said that they had learned a lot from Russell Terrace, so Ms. Ortiz deserved a lot of credit for holding the fort and doing it professionally and that everybody should be grateful for her doing it the way she did and be proud of it.

Chairman Ceballos asked if anybody else had any more comments.

Ms. Ortiz thanked Chairman Ceballos and Vice-Chairman Dr. Garza and the Board because they had allowed her to be in the position of Interim/Acting Executive Director for essentially 24 months and during that time she had learned a lot. She said that just as Vice-Chairman Dr. Garza would run to her, she would run to Chairman Ceballos who had guided her, the staff with whom she had worked through many challenges that they had faced and overcome, they had laughed and cried together, there had been a lot of ups and down, so she wanted to thank everybody because without them she could not have done her job to reflect it on to the Board and to the Agency, so she thanked all of them very much and Mary Gaona whom she said was eager to work with everybody, also Alma who was not present because she was at school and added that everybody had agreed that they would work with whoever the Board would recommend.

Ms. Ortiz stated that they are confident the Board had made the best choice and would move forward, that it took a lot to change because the path they had been going, they had kind of deterred away from the mission which was to assist homeless families and to assist low income public families, that they had gone a different route, a huge different route, to pets and others, but they had kind of maneuvered back and that everybody knew they are on the right path and the Board had set the example, so she thanked them for having allowed her to grow in that capacity for 24 months.

Chairman Ceballos thanked Ms. Ortiz, welcomed Ms. Gaona and stated that in coming back Ms. Gaona would find many opportunities in the leadership role, executive role to do the things that perhaps she wanted to do in the past and hopefully they could move on to those things quickly as soon as she would be on board.

Chairman Ceballos expressed appreciation to the Board and the Attorneys as well and stated that he and Vice-Chairman Dr. Garza had officially reached the two year mark that week and wanted to thank them and the Commissioners that had been around with them. Chairman Ceballos mentioned that he thought they were now getting to a stage of moving into a new venue of activity which was exciting and less dealing with the past, so he wanted to thank all of them for their time and for getting them to the present together.

Commissioner Dr. Rodriguez moved to adjourn.
Commissioner Ms. Guerra seconded the motion.

Attorney Doug Poneck recommended Chairman Ceballos to mention about transition.

Chairman Ceballos stated that Mary Gaona currently served in an important leadership role at Bethany House which was very important to him and in discussion with the Board it was very important for the Board that they would assist in any way, shape or form as they would transition Ms. Gaona into LHA. Chairman Ceballos mentioned that a lot of them were supportive of Bethany House and the people they serve, so a message to both Ms. Gaona and the Board of Directors at Bethany House, was that they were prepared to assist in any way, shape or form in order to make the transition effective and also helpful to Bethany House in any way they can.

8. ADJOURNMENT

Chairman Ceballos moved to adjourn the meeting.
Vice-Chairman Dr. Garza seconded the motion.
Motion passed unanimously.

Meeting adjourned at 5:03 p.m.



Jose L. Ceballos, Board Chairman

Melissa Ortiz, Acting/Interim Executive Director