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Ann Murguia in front of one of ANDA's new houses in Argentine. Photo by Sylvia Maria Gross / KCUR.

**KANSAS CITY, MO (kcur)** - *Wyandotte County is slated to receive more than \$3 million in federal stimulus funding to support the redevelopment of abandoned or foreclosed homes. The Argentine Neighborhood Development Association hopes to use 800 thousand of those dollars to improve housing in its area. But the head of that organization is also a Unified Government Commissioner. But some other commissioners are concerned that it might be a conflict of interest.*

Elva Hernandez lives in the East Argentine neighborhood of Kansas City. As of last year, her house has new sidewalks and curbs out front.

"When they broke my street down, the bricks were from 1904," Hernandez says. "That's the last time we had sidewalks. Now that we have them, the kids can ride their bikes. We got people walking now up and down the streets that we didn't have before."

Hernandez credits one person with the improvement.

"Murguia promised that we would get it, and we got it," she says.

Ann Murguia moved to Argentine ten years ago, with her husband, who had grown up in the neighborhood. And she found there were others like them.

"There are a number of Hispanic children that were raised here that want to move back to this community," Murguia says. "But, they had done really well for themselves and there wasn't necessarily housing stock that could accommodate their current needs."

So with a small group of residents, Murguia helped found the [Argentine Neighborhood Development Association](#). Besides improving infrastructure, ANDA buys vacant or blighted properties, and builds new homes. They've sold two already,

and have three underway.

Walking around the neighborhood, Murguia points out a vacant lot on Metropolitan Avenue, "We have acquired that property and we would like to build a new house there. The stimulus money would pay for that construction of a new house. They don't want to see just vacant lots with overgrown grass which nobody's taking care of. If I can build on that, I can get a homeowner there who's paying taxes; we're broadening our Wyandotte County tax base, and improving the neighborhood collectively."

The [Neighborhood Stabilization Program](#) will help ANDA build homes more quickly. But Unified Government Commissioner Mark Holland is concerned about the fact that Murguia is also on the County's Board of Commissioners.

"The stimulus money as it's distributed cannot be handled by any public official," Holland says, "Or the city government who assigns it to that group might well be liable to repay it."

Ann Murguia says she's received written approval from the federal and state agencies administering this money, and will abstain from voting on the distribution of funds to specific organizations.

But Holland thinks that's not enough, "It just doesn't look good. You can show the hoops that you've jumped through to receive a contract. But if you're sitting on the Board of Commissioners and you're receiving money from your government, I think it looks bad.

Wyandotte County's current code of ethics considers it a conflict of interest if a commissioner votes to award a contract to a business, which he or she has a stake in. Unless it's a non-profit. Commissioner Holland wants to re-write the code to include non-profits.

"We have many, many not-for-profits in our community, and there are limited dollars. The issue is that there's an appearance that there's preferential treatment given for ANDA, because their executive director is a commissioner."

Murguia says ANDA is the only organization doing this kind of work in Argentine, and that she has the support of the neighborhoods in her district. "To go out of your way to create a law to stop someone from redeveloping one of the poorest neighborhoods in Wyandotte County just seems odd to me. It's a big waste of time and money."

It's all become a bit a showdown between Commissioners Murguia and Holland. But both say there are larger issues at stake.

"We need clean transparent government that looks for all the world and is for all the world as transparent and open as possible." Murguia says this revision to the code of ethics could deter civic-minded people at non-profits from running for office. And she says, time is running short to use those stimulus dollars.

"The commission keeps delaying this to try to make something bad out of what I'm doing. We have until January 15th to spend this money or it goes back to the federal government."

The Unified Government's Board of Commissioners is expected to vote tonight (October 1, 2009) on whether to revise its code of ethics.

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