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Villages block Chicago's bid to buy residents' land

Towns stand firm in O'Hare dispute

By Virginia Groark
Tribune staff reporter

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Elk Grove Village and Bensenville vowed Wednesday to prevent Chicago from buying property from residents who can't sell because of the O'Hare International Airport expansion proposal, jeopardizing the city's hardship acquisition program.

The two northwest suburbs must sign off on any land sales to Chicago, according to the Federal Aviation Administration. The municipal officials' blanket refusal to do so, means Chicago won't be able to buy land from people who need to sell for financial, medical or job-relocation reasons.

Instead, the two villages said they would consider buying the land if people meet hardship criteria.

"Our point is we are not going to allow the City of Chicago to come in and block-bust our community," said John Geils, president of Bensenville, where about 500 homes would be affected by the O'Hare expansion proposal. "We are not going to let them encourage panic peddling."

Rosemarie Andolino, executive director of the O'Hare project, said she hopes the municipal officials change their minds.

"I have every hope and expectation that if the villages are presented a genuine hardship case by their constituents that they will act in a humane and compassionate manner," she said.

Chicago set up a hot line last week and said it intends to send letters to roughly 550 property owners in the two villages that would be affected by the expansion proposal to see if they meet the hardship criteria. The city launched the initiative after the FAA sent it guidance to help set up the program.

But the suburbs are skeptical. Geils said the city is trying to make it look like the O'Hare project is a done deal. The FAA does not expect to make a decision on the program until September 2005 and if it rejects the plan no homes would have to be destroyed, he said.

"What they have been trying to do from the beginning is to establish a fait accompli in our communities, where people thought the [expansion] was done deal," he said.

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Bensenville has already agreed to buy 17 homes, Geils said. Elk Grove Village, where about 50 businesses would be affected by the plan, also would be willing to talk to property owners if they meet hardship criteria, but village Mayor Craig Johnson, doubts anyone will step forward.

The City of Chicago hot line number for property owners who want more information on hardship criteria is 773-686-4600.

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