

U.S.F. & G. WINS BID FOR INNER HARBOR SITE

Renewal Agency Acts Despite Charges By Rights Group

By Jane L. Ridge

Over the protests of civil rights leaders, the urban renewal commission unanimously granted the United States Fidelity and Guaranty Company exclusive negotiating rights yesterday to a renewal lot in the Inner Harbor area.

The commissioners, who had been evenly split last week after hearing the rights leaders' objections, managed to achieve unanimity after their chairman met with W. J. Jeffery, president and chairman of the board of U.S.F. & G.

Representatives of Activists Inc., a broad civil rights organization here, repeated their claims yesterday that the Baltimore-based, national insurance firm practices racial discrimination in employment policies and coverage practices.

Positive Plan Sought

They asked that U.S.F. & G. be denied exclusive negotiating rights to the Inner Harbor site until the company's officials establish a "positive and affirmative action plan" to correct the situation.

In response to a letter from Mr. Jeffery denying previous discrimination and promising that the firm will "seek out" means of increasing minority job opportunities, commissioners Charles L. Wagandt 2d and Titon H. Jobbin joined Eugene M. Finkblatt, the chairman, in approving the company's request.

Saul M. Perdue, the only Negro member of the commission, left for a school board meeting before the renewal.
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commission hearing was half over, and did not vote on the request.

Mr. Feinblatt told the civil rights leaders that he was convinced the insurance firm has made a "sincere commitment" and is acting in "good faith" to insure future equal employment opportunity.

Cleveland A. Chandler, chairman of the rights group, replied that Mr. Jeffery's written assurances to the commission contained no specific promises and he said "The only thing we have from this company is a vague statement."

Noting that the executive's letter had put forth no employment goals, deadlines or programs for achieving equal job opportunities, Mr. Chandler declared, "All the dimensions of an affirmative action program are missing."

Hire 75 P. C. Negroes

In a prepared statement, he asked that the firm be required to hire non-white workers "to fill 75 per cent of all vacancies in U.S.F.&G. resulting from its normal work force turnover and-or expansion, until the racial composition of its work force is comparable to the racial composition of workers in the Baltimore labor market area."

The insurance firm asked for, and received, exclusive negotiating rights to the site at the northwest corner of Pratt and Light streets in the Inner Harbor area.

The company has announced plans to build a new headquarters building, between 30 and 35-stories high, at a cost of more than \$10,000,000.

Another Hearing

Mr. Feinblatt stressed yesterday that no disposition agreements will be signed for the renewal land with U.S.F.&G. until another public hearing is held, six months from now.

Declaring that the renewal agency is not the proper agency to handle the Activists's complaints of discrimination, he suggested that the six-months waiting period will allow the organization time to file their complaints with the appropriate bodies.

He noted the commission's land disposition policy statement—adopted in 1966—provides for waving of competitive bidding for renewal sites when the developer concerned can offer a "significant benefit to the city that no other developer can provide."

That clause in the policy statement is applicable to the U.S.F.&G. case because, Mr. Feinblatt said, construction of a national headquarters building on the Inner Harbor I lot will increase the tax assessments for the site "more than ten-fold."

"One of the primary objectives," he added, "is to retain in Baltimore the home office of the company, which is important to the economic life of Baltimore."