The Housing Authority of the City of McKeesport will get about $1.37 million, or about 1 percent of $114.1 million from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to Pennsylvania agencies for capital improvements. “This is lower than last year,” McKeesport executive director Stephen Bucklew said Tuesday. “Last year we got $1,550,000.”

Allegheny County Housing Authority will get nearly $4.11 million for use in such places as Braddock and Wilmerding. “Federal funding is continuing to decline and hampers our ability to do the work we are trying to do,” ACHA director of development Jack McGraw said. “It’s a 1.5 percent decrease from last year.”

That in turn is part of $1.772 billion being handed out to approximately 3,100 authorities across the country from HUD’s Capital Fund Program.

For McKeesport’s director the amount of funding is not a surprise because of the reduction of units such as those in the Yester Square area of Crawford Village. “There used to be 204 units,” Bucklew said. “When it is all over there will be 68.”

What is surprising is the timing, which Bucklew saw as unusually early given his 30 years of involvement with public housing. The capital funding is for fiscal 2015, which began Oct. 1, 2014, but HUD sometimes hasn’t sent out official notice of it “until June, July, August,” Bucklew said. “I’ve even gotten this as late as September and October.”

He said demolition happened “a few years ago” but HUD didn’t remove the units from McKeesport’s inventory in 2014. “It will probably go up two years from now because they are building replacement units,” Bucklew said.

The capital funding is separate from operational subsidy sent to McKeesport and other authorities. That’s sent out for a January-to-December or calendar year but that hasn’t been finalized. “I think it is going to be around the same (as in past years), about $3 million,” Bucklew said. “For a comparable purpose, our operating subsidy has been almost level for the past eight, nine, 10 years, but the capital fund has decreased significantly.”

A decade ago McKeesport could expect $3 million from Washington for capital purposes. The city’s authority has found itself having to do more with less money, replacing buildings from the 1940s and 1950s with structures needing larger closets, air conditioning, prevailing wage requirements under the federal Davis-Bacon and Related Acts and “Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards.”

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, those are one of two sets of standards for state and local government facilities, along with accessible design standards, under the Americans with Disabilities Act. “You basically have to tear half the buildings down,” Bucklew said. “It is hard to renovate them and modernize them to meet today’s standards.”

In neighborhoods that surround the McKeesport authority’s various communities there was another standard for the city, a three-year voluntary compliance agreement that affected Community Development Block Grant funding the city gets from HUD. Thankfully, Bucklew said, “we were never affected. We apply for our funding separately and we were never penalized by any of that.”

A focus for county housing authority use of that federal money will be at the high-rise Wilmerding Apartments. “We are beginning to look at modernization activity there,” McGraw said. “We will be
releasing later this year an exterior improvements contract involving some weatherization-related work, that will be followed in subsequent years by modernization activity inside the building.”

Elsewhere, Allegheny County Housing Authority is in the third stage of improvements to the General Braddock Tower in Braddock, which will be funded by part of the federal $4.11 million, and the Orchard Park project in Duquesne, which isn't getting any part of that funding. “It already was funded through prior years' allocation,” McGraw said, as well as the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency.

In Duquesne on the former Burns Heights property, McGraw said, “We're probably ahead of schedule. We have most of the buildings out of the ground now and framed and under roof (as well as a) community center.” He said his authority looks to complete the first buildings on Orchard Park “probably in May ... and we'd like to see the entire project completed by the end of summer.”

In all 77 Pennsylvania agencies are recipients of HUD capital funding, with the largest shares going to housing authorities in Philadelphia ($43.16 million) and Pittsburgh ($12.45 million). County housing authorities in Westmoreland ($1.95 million), Fayette ($2.1 million) and Washington ($1.04 million) will get shares as well.