



HOUSING SENIORS

Middle-aged Derwood woman we know is talking with her brother and sister about selling the family home - a half-century-old house their father built with his own hands. The reason? Their father, now in his 90s, is living in an "assisted living" complex, and the cost is so high (about \$3,000 a month), the family needs the money from selling the home to pay his bills.

It's not an unusual story these days - there are, in fact, far sadder stories. As Americans live longer and grow older, more and more families are struggling to come up with affordable living arrangements for elderly relatives no longer able to live on their own.

That's why it would be smart to pay close attention to last week's proposals from County Executive Doug Duncan on senior housing.

Duncan endorsed three senior-housing projects proposed for the county; they now are awaiting approval. He set as a goal the addition of 200 new affordable senior-housing units per year in the county. Also, he proposed changing the zoning process to make it easier to build affordable homes for seniors in residential neighborhoods.

Such projects now must go through a sometimes-lengthy process in order to get "special exception" from county zoning officials. Duncan wants to short-circuit that process by allowing senior housing as a "permitted use" in residential neighborhoods.

Aides say details of the change have not been worked out. "There are no specifics yet," said Scott Reilly, Duncan's planning manager. "We're just trying to make it a little easier to get through the zoning process." A more specific proposal - part of a larger revamping of the county's housing policies - will come in the fall.

Duncan and his aides take pains to point out both the growing need for more senior housing (they cite statistics showing the proportion of the county population 65 years and older will increase from 11.5 percent to 25 percent in the next 30 years) and that such housing has a "minimal impact" on a neighborhood.

Still, making it easier for any type of development to get through the zoning process is sure to raise a few eyebrows, and probably a few hackles. We can't imagine this proposal will sail past the County Council, not to mention interested residents, unless it is crafted with extreme care and sensitivity.

And that is as it should be. People have a right to be protective of their neighborhoods, and any eas-

ing of the zoning process must be closely scrutinized.

When all is said and done, however, we hope it happens. Duncan is right, after all. More affordable housing options for seniors are needed, and even more will be needed in the future. And, it is hard to envision a type of development that would have less impact on a neighborhood than senior housing.

Making affordable housing for seniors more plentiful should indeed be a top priority of this county government.

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