



SENIOR HOUSING SOUGHT

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County Executive Douglas M. Duncan wants to see Montgomery's zoning laws changed to make it easier to build senior housing developments in residential neighborhoods.

Currently, proposals to build senior housing projects in residential communities have to get a special exception from the Board of Appeals, a process that Duncan called "an extraordinary legal hurdle for such an ordinary but important land use."

"It just makes no sense to me that most senior housing is not a permitted use under our zoning laws," he said. The issue is critical, said Duncan (D), because of the county's projected demographics, which show that the percentage of the population age 65 and over will increase sharply in the coming decades. He has asked county housing officials to consider requesting a change in the zoning law.

The county executive's comments came at a recent news conference on senior housing issues in which he also expressed support for the approval of three proposed projects, all of which would include low- or moderate-income units, in three areas of the county.

One of those projects--the Andrew-Kim House, a 76-unit complex in Olney being developed by Victory Housing, a nonprofit wing of the Archdiocese of Washington--has received its special exception approval from the Board of Appeals.

Victory Housing is also the developer for an 86-unit project envisioned for Newbridge Drive in Potomac. And the nonprofit is working with Stavrou Associates Inc., a private builder, to develop Hampshire Village, a project of about 200 units in the Cloverly area. Both of those projects still need approval, and in both cases, nearby residents have raised concerns about how the developments will affect their neighborhoods.

These and other "affordable" senior housing projects are needed, according to Duncan and other county officials, to avoid a shortage. Statistics from the Maryland Department of Planning project that county residents age 65 and over will grow from 10 percent of the population now to 16 percent in the next 20 years.

"This issue is going to be a huge challenge for us as the population of this county becomes older," said council member Steven A. Silverman (D-At Large). "And we need to do something because the existing system is too cumbersome."

Changing the zoning laws to remove the special exception for senior housing is bound to be a highly charged issue if Duncan or other officials pursue it.

"It would be a major, major fight," said Norman G. Knopf, an attorney who frequently represents community groups opposing development and is representing homeowners concerned about the Newbridge Drive proposal.

"The community has a legitimate concern here because the county has a history of allowing things that are not meant for residential neighborhoods," he said of the Potomac project. Despite the county's assertion that senior housing is largely "benign," Knopf said there are aesthetic concerns. "Large institutional buildings plopped down in residential neighborhoods are totally out of place."

Knopf also questioned how great a need the county has for senior housing. He pointed out that some projects have been withdrawn by developers in recent months because they believed there was a glut of senior housing.

According to the Montgomery County Planning Department, the county now has about 7,500 units in more than 40 complexes, including both market-rate and subsidized housing. Another 2,800 units either have been approved or are in the process.

Sally Roman, the research supervisor at the Planning Department, said the county seems to have a good supply of senior housing overall--for now. Yet, she added, there may very well be future shortages for some types of senior housing, such as assisted living facilities.

John D. Spencer, vice president of Victory Housing, noted that the very low-income frail elderly, who require assisted living facilities, have a much harder time than others because very few such rental units are available.

Spencer said his organization is working with neighbors on the project in Potomac to devise a mutually agreeable plan before submitting a special exception request to the Board of Appeals.

He noted that any proposals would still have to go through the normal planning process before they could be built if the requirement for a special exception were eliminated. "It would be one less step to go through, but it would not be a blank check."

Stephen Stavrou, president of Stavrou Associates, said the special exception process adds about a year to the time it takes to get a project approved and another 10 to 15 percent to the cost of a project. "It's extremely difficult," he said.

Duncan has asked Elizabeth Davison, director of the county's Department of Housing and Community Affairs, to consider this issue as part of an ongoing review of the county's overall housing policy that is expected to be completed this fall. Meanwhile, the Planning Board is reviewing

existing zoning laws.

Planning Board Chairman William H. Hussmann said the special exception rule for senior housing will be reviewed as part of that effort, also scheduled for completion this fall. Hussmann agreed that the issue of senior housing is becoming more critical, not only because the population is aging but also because the number of lots available for development--especially in the downcounty area--is dwindling.

The issue needs to be explored, he said, but he also cautioned that a complete removal of the special exception is not likely to be passed. Consideration will have to be given to such things as project size and location. Even with the special exception process in place, he noted, the county has been approving senior housing projects regularly.

"It's not like these projects get stymied," he said.

Source: Maryland Department of Planning

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