

"Federation Corner" column
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Recent events point the way for affordable housing in the county

by Wayne Goldstein

In a four-day period in the last eight days, two visionaries spoke about how to provide better housing. Their statements, when taken together, could have a profound impact on how we create affordable housing in the future. Montgomery County could lead the way in this new direction, just as it once led the way by being the first jurisdiction in the nation to require Moderately Priced Dwelling Units (MPDU), beginning in the mid '70s.

On February 14th, Andres Duany published an article titled: "Restoring the Real New Orleans - How do we save the Crescent City? Re-create the unique building culture that spawned it." Duany first came to Montgomery County in June 1988 to lead a weeklong design charrette for a new town that came to be known as Kentlands. He advocated for a way to design compact communities that included a wide range of housing types from apartments to mansions in close proximity to each other as well as placing commercial and retail uses all within walking distance of one another. He co-founded the Congress of New Urbanism that has helped to spread this "new" neotraditional approach of recreating the original cities and towns that had been supplanted by postwar suburbanization which relied on the automobile.

This approach has swept the nation in the last 20 years. Kentlands was one of the earliest efforts, and now we see multiple versions being planned, for better and worse, in the villages of Clarksburg. However, even as Duany's vision has become many planners' vision, Duany may be heading in a new direction. After Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, Duany began to make more frequent visits to the city, which had originally inspired his new urbanist philosophy, in order to help plan for the rebuilding. He helped lead a charrette there in August 2006. One account of this event stated that he "drummed up many of his past projects as examples of what his planning firm will create if chosen..." This writer also noted that many less prosperous residents did not participate because they had either not returned to the city or were too busy trying to find work or housing.

Although Duany's and others' neotraditional towns and architectural styles are as expensive as they are popular, Duany wrote this last week: "What can be done? Somehow the building culture that created the original New Orleans must be reinstated. The hurdle of drawings, permitting, contractors, inspections-the professionalism of it all-eliminates self-building. Somehow there must be a process whereupon people can build simple, functional houses for themselves, either by themselves or by barter with professionals. There must be free house designs that can be built in small stages and that do not require an architect, complicated permits, or inspections; there must be common-sense technical standards. Without this there will be the pall of debt for everyone! To start I would recommend an experimental "opt-out zone": areas where one "contracts out" of the current American system, which consists of the nanny state raising standards to the point where it is so costly and complicated to build that only the state can provide affordable housing-solving a problem that it created in the first place."

Duany has come to the realization that what makes New Orleans so unique in so many ways is the fact that the people have a lot of time to cook and make music and dance and do other social activities because the "self-building" of their homes has meant that they have no mortgages that require them to work all the time to make the monthly payments. Thus he believes that the only way to bring back New Orleans is to bring back self-building.

On February 18th, I watched John Spears of the Sustainable Design Group of Gaithersburg give a talk at the Takoma Park Green Building Conference. While I am sure he has given variations of this talk many times in his 30+ years as a proponent of sustainable design around the world, it was still remarkable that he told the audience that homes and even residential towers could be built today that used local materials, created healthy

indoor environments, and would keep such buildings "off the grid," meaning that most, if not all, energy needs could be met on, around, and inside the building.

On his website, he writes: "We have been designing solar, wind and biomass energy systems since 1973." His firm helps design what is called the Earth Home System which includes walls made of compressed earth bricks, a mixture of soil, sand and lime that "are as strong as concrete or fired bricks but are much more environmentally sustainable and lower cost." These buildings can be built by would be homeowners as well as workers trained in skills, such as in the case of earth bricks, that have been used for thousands of years. Such houses can be as plain or as sophisticated as desired. These buildings could likely meet LEED Platinum standards because some of the most demanding requirements of the LEED program, such as processing waste water and sewage on site, are considered to be a standard feature.

We have endured more than six years of rhetoric about the affordable housing crisis that has resulted in little additional affordable housing. When one looks at this new proposal of Andres Duany, and the decades of experience by John Spears and his colleagues in producing a revolutionary form of green, self-sustaining self-building, this presents a unique opportunity for the most recent round of election year rhetoric to actually produce a real benefit for affordable housing in Montgomery County. If the County Executive decided to use publicly owned land to build an affordable detached single-family subdivision, townhouse community, and residential highrise, using the recommended standards of Duany and the well-proven standards of Spears, we wouldn't just create a little more affordable housing, we would be exploring ways to make affordable housing more affordable to build, to maintain, and to provide energy for. If prospective owners and tenants could provide sweat equity through the construction process in exchange for lower prices, this would add a new level of commitment and empowerment for people who may not have had many such opportunities before.

Obviously, the key to making this idea work would be to allow for greater flexibility in current construction standards and processes. The result could be far more durable buildings with far lower energy costs. The lessons learned from these reasonable experiments could be further applied to affordable housing, to market-rate housing as well as to commercial construction. Just as my recommendation that county buildings be required to reach LEED Gold and even occasional LEED Platinum could, if implemented, more quickly inspire greater private sector efforts to do the same, so could this approach to higher LEED through greater sustainability further inspire others. The government must hold itself to higher standards if it expects others to accept the validity of those standards. If the county does not now take actions as bold as it took when it began the MPDU program to deal with a problem as intractable as housing affordability, we will fall further behind, even as county officials talk louder and longer rather than act.