

"Federation Corner" column
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Accurate housing data needed

by Jim Humphrey, Chair
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For at least the last six years, we have heard officials exclaim that there is an affordable housing crisis in Montgomery County, yet they have failed to insist on the appropriate data to realistically address the issue.

We can look at the issue of homelessness for an example of the need for appropriate data. In January 2007, the Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless conducted a one-day survey and found 810 homeless adults and 329 homeless children in the county. In terms of the data needed to solve the problem, however, this is a meaningless statistic. The figure needed in order to address the problem is the actual number of dwelling units required to get all of those 1,129 persons into housing. How many two or three bedroom units are needed to house one or two parent families with children? If five men or five women are housed together--the maximum number of persons unrelated by blood who can share a dwelling under county law--how many units are needed to house all homeless single persons?

There is a similar lack of appropriate data on the affordable housing needs of county workers. Beginning in the 2002 elections, we have heard candidates running for County office assert that our teachers, police and firefighters cannot afford to live in the county in which they serve. But in the six years we have heard this "sound bite" no one has attempted to quantify the problem. As I have stated in testimony to the Council, every county employee gets a paycheck and a housing survey could be attached, or distributed to those whose checks are electronically deposited. No need to mail them back; they can be returned to supervisors for collection.

By asking three simple questions, the scale of the county employee housing problem can be determined.

1. Do you currently live in Montgomery County?
2. If the answer to question 1 is "no," would you like to live in the county but cannot find appropriate, affordably priced housing?
3. If the answer to question 2 is "yes," what type of housing do you seek (single-family detached, townhouse, apartment, and number of bedrooms) and what amount can you spend on housing each month?

Since the county government is the second largest employer in the county behind the Federal government, we could use the survey results to extrapolate the approximate scale of the problem facing Federal and private sector employees in the county.

Or, the county could use the more direct approach used to provide employer assisted housing in the City of Alexandria. When they found their new teachers could not afford to live near their jobs, the city bought an apartment building where teachers in need are provided lower cost housing.

As to the Moderately Priced Dwelling Units (MPDU) Program, there are currently 3,700 units under MPDU Program control and an additional 700 households on the waiting list for a sale or rental MPDU. Now, the seemingly low number of applicants in a county with around 360,000 households may be a result of ineffective Program marketing. And more than 700 new units are needed, in order to meet demand and replace existing units with price controls that will expire in the near future. But, on the supply side, around 2,300 new MPDUs will be provided in residential projects in the pipeline, which have already received Preliminary Plan approval from the Planning Board but are not yet built. And, there are

another 500 or so MPDUs that could be produced in residential projects awaiting Preliminary Plan approval.

With regard to housing needs for households on the lower end of the income scale, in spring 2007 around 17,000 households applied to the Housing Opportunities Commission for rental assistance vouchers. For the most part, however, the annual income of these households is too low to allow them to qualify for the MPDU program. As a result of Bush administration cutbacks in the Federal housing voucher program, there is a great need for rental housing that is affordable to households earning 35% of area median income or below.

For the most part, lower priced rental housing in Montgomery County exists in garden apartments built between 1940 and 1970. Officials need to get accurate data on the number of such units currently existing in the county, so that they can work to protect them. As Planning Board Director Royce Hanson has stated, it is critical that we find a way to retain and maintain this affordable housing stock. The best way to accomplish this goal is to leave existing zoning in place for these properties, should the master plans for the surrounding areas be revised. Whenever a multi-family building property is upzoned, allowing a higher building height and greater number of units per acre, the owner has an incentive to demolish the older, existing building in which all of the units are relatively affordable and replace it with a new structure in which only a small percentage of units will be required to be moderately priced.

Speaking of master plans, officials must find a way to foster creation of affordable housing that does not allow for violation of height and density limits contained in these plans. Developers who create MPDUs in their projects can already provide them in alternative building types to market rate units, and are allowed reductions in setbacks from property lines and in required minimum green area and public use space. After spending two years or more revising an area master plan, residents should expect that affordable housing be provided within the building standards approved in the plan.

Until officials begin using appropriate data to implement affordable housing solutions, all their talk amounts to little more than political rhetoric, likely designed to convince voters that they're tackling the problem come reelection time. My advice to them is to begin implementing solutions as quickly as possible, and then run for reelection on your achievements rather than the repetition of a promise.