

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **Death knell for workforce housing**

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The county Workforce Housing program, which was established by the previous County Council on December 1, 2006, had modest but lofty goals. The purpose was "to promote the production of housing affordable to households with incomes at or below 120% of the area-wide median income." The program was created to provide affordably priced housing to individuals and families who earn too much to allow them to qualify for the county's Moderately Priced Dwelling Unit program, which caps qualifying income at 75% of area median income, but who did not earn enough to allow them to purchase or rent the averaged-price market rate homes then being constructed in Montgomery County.

I say the program had modest goals because it only required Workforce Housing units be provided in new residential development projects located in Metro Station areas, which were planned to have at least 35 total units and were on properties zoned for a density of at least 40 dwelling units per acre. Then, after so limiting the number of sites in the county on which Workforce Housing would be provided if redeveloped, the Council required a number of WH units equal to 10% of the number of market rate units in the project. Developers were not asked to convert 10% of market rate units to Workforce Housing units, however, but were granted additional density (some might call it "free" density) in their projects to accommodate the required WH units.

On April 6 of this year, the members of the current County Council sounded the death knell for the Workforce Housing Program by voting unanimously to convert it from a mandatory program to a voluntary one. Their reason for killing the program was apparently the three most powerful words in a Council member's vocabulary--development industry pressure.

In a February 25 report on the issue, the Planning Department staff wrote, "According to the development community, providing workforce housing is cost prohibitive." Even Council President Floreen bowed to development industry pressure to kill the program, although she sponsored the legislation that created the Workforce Housing Program three years ago. Yeah, let's make it voluntary. That ought to work well...oh, wait, the whole reason the program was started was because the development industry wasn't building housing that was affordable to workers in the county earning average salaries, opting instead to create primarily luxury housing that offers maximum profit on investment.

We will probably never see a single Workforce Housing Program dwelling unit. In the three year history of the program, only 3 or 4 projects were approved that would have been required to provide Workforce Housing units. Still, it's worth examining the goals that were established for the program when it was created. The language in the enabling legislation states that construction of Workforce Housing was "intended to--

- "allow households with incomes at or below 120% of the area median income to have greater housing choices in the county,
- "increase the availability of housing in the county for public employees and other workers whose income cannot support the high cost of housing that is located close to their workplace and who, as a result, are increasingly priced out of housing opportunities,
- "assist county employers in reducing critical labor shortages of skilled and semi-skilled workers by providing housing that will be accessible to the workers' workplaces, and
- "reduce traffic congestion by shortening commute distances for employees who work in the county but who otherwise would live elsewhere and encouraging more employees to live in Metro Station Policy Areas."

By the way, the developers of the 3 or 4 approved projects that would have had to provide required Workforce Housing have been given an easy out by this Council, too. A simplified method of seeking amendments to these developers' projects has been created, which will allow the Planning Board to cancel their requirement to build WH units. Gotta help the developers, you know. We're in tough economic times, you know. Well, if times are tough for the county development industry, imagine how tough it is for workforce income level households who have just had their affordable housing program killed by Council.

The real losers in all of this are, of course, the young people who are just starting out in their adult lives--our kids, who were raised here, went to school here, and would like to work in, and continue to live in, the county they've called home, but who can't find an affordably priced home to rent or buy. The American dream has just become a more distant hope for them.

Maybe the county doesn't really need all that affordable Workforce Housing, anyway. After all, last year 14,000 jobs were lost in the county. And County Executive Leggett plans to cut the county government workforce by 490 positions, 260 of which are now vacant and 230 of which are currently filled. So, I guess we can put a positive spin on the whole issue by thinking that as county residents lose their jobs, and the size of the workforce decreases, the problem of having an insufficient supply of affordable workforce housing is fixing itself. Now there's a position our Council members should be able to run on for reelection this year.

*The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to [theelms518@earthlink.net](mailto:theelms518@earthlink.net)*