

NEW TIMES, OLD NEEDS

By SEAN SCULLY
Journal staff writer

When Montgomery Housing Partnership proposed a small affordable housing development in Wheaton last summer, President Tad Baldwin never imagined the political firestorm the group was touching off.

Baldwin's nonprofit agency proposed 144 moderately priced apartments and townhouses on five acres on University Boulevard.

"We thought it would be good for the community and business in Wheaton," Baldwin said.

Almost immediately, area residents rose up in anger, demanding the project be scaled back and redesigned.

The plan drew hundreds of residents to a meeting over the summer and led to the formation of the Wheaton Citizens Coalition, an umbrella group of civic associations opposed to the development.

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In October, MHP killed the plan when the Montgomery County Planning Board refused to rezone the property without major changes.

That defeat, and the punishing public battle that preceded it, signaled a major change in the way government and nonprofit groups should help the poorer segments of the county's population find housing, Baldwin said.

The key, he said, may be to rely less on new construction. Instead, affordable housing groups should turn inward, repairing and maintaining existing housing.

"Times have changed and we've got to be smarter and need different thinking to do a better job than we have before," Baldwin said.

County's 'moral fervor' wanes

It's hard to say exactly how many people are having trouble finding reasonably priced housing in the county, Baldwin said, but there is strong evidence of a shortage.

The county's Housing Opportunities Commission, for example, has about 8,000 families on the waiting list for housing assistance. In its recent county census, the Planning Board found almost half of all renters in the county are spending more than 25 percent of their income for housing.

Historically, the county has been considered a leader in addressing the need for affordable housing. It established a national reputation in 1974 with the Moderately Priced Dwelling Unit law, requiring that 15 percent of any development of 50 houses or more be priced to be affordable to families earning substantially less

than the median income.

The drive to provide affordable housing began in the 1950s and 1960s as Montgomery County experienced explosive growth and development. The increasing number of upscale developments priced the working class out of the market and displaced poor people who had been living for generations in small, rural pockets of substandard housing.

Ashton resident Peg McKory, called by many "the mother of the MPDU program," recalls the 1960s as the liberal heyday of Montgomery County. There was, she said, a group of activists who approached helping the poor with an almost religious zeal.

"There was a lot of energy," McKory said. "It was all part of the civil rights movement. The churches were strongly involved in

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—Jeff Taylor/Journal

Tad Baldwin, Frankie Blackburn head the Housing Partnership.

Buying a dream home with hard work

By SEAN SCULLY
Journal staff writer

Jennifer and Gary Rebsch say they're doing fine without any government help.

"We were brought up to work hard, save money, and you realize your dreams in that way," Jennifer Rebsch said.

That's why the Rebsches didn't like the now-defunct productivity housing program, even though they were exactly the kind of people it was intended to help.

The County Council killed the plan last fall after five years of controversy. The plan was intended to create homes affordable to people earning nearly the county's median income. None of the six developments envisioned in the original productivity housing law was built.

Gary Rebsch, 34, is a county firefighter. His wife, 33, is a radiological technician. They have two daughters, ages 10 and 5. They won't say what their annual income is, but it is

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—Aria Economopoulos/Journal

Judith Anderson, who led the fight against a development in Wheaton, would like to see old apartment buildings renovated.

NIMBY doesn't fit housing opponent

By SEAN SCULLY
Journal staff writer

Don't dare call Judith Anderson a NIMBY. Anderson, the head of the newly formed Wheaton Citizens Coalition, spearheaded the high-profile fight against an affordable housing project on University Boulevard, proposed by the nonprofit Montgomery Housing Partnership.

But she insists she's not a NIMBY—a common slang term, standing for "not in my back yard," for people who oppose development.

"NIMBY is an incendiary label that has been used effectively to fight opponents to their projects," she said.

After months of bitter fighting, the coalition was able to force MHP to kill the proposed development in October.

"We have never been opposed to growth. That's not the point of the Wheaton Citizens Coalition. . . . What we support is advised and

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Once-invincible crusaders rethink their mission, tactics

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what was going on."

The activists ran for political office, producing a crop of council members whose names now are legendary among affordable housing advocates: Elizabeth Scull, Idamae Garrott, Norman Christeller, among many others.

"These were people who wanted to see changes happen and were in a position to see that it happened," McRory said.

"I guess I'd call them New Deal Democrats," said Baldwin, who in those years was a staffer at HOC.

"They grew up in a world where government did a variety of things."

But, McRory said, in Montgomery County and the nation as a whole, the liberal energy that produced the civil rights movements and the federal Great Society programs faded through the 1970s and 1980s.

"I think the moral fervor has been disappearing," McRory said, sighing deeply.

Indeed, affordable housing programs have faced tough times this year in Montgomery County.

In quick succession this summer and fall, public outcry killed the Wheaton project, forced into limbo an HOC development in Olney, and drove the County Council to kill the 5-year-old Productivity Housing program, targeted at working-class families earning less than the county's median income.

"There is absolutely, as far as I can tell, zero support for the concept of new low-income housing," McRory said.

Politics kills program

Other affordable housing activists see the turning point as the bruising battle over productivity housing.

"I am absolutely convinced that's done more harm to the case for affordable housing than any particular fight on any particular project," said Gus Bauman, a land-use attorney and former Planning Board chairman.

County Council member William E. Hanna Jr., D-Rockville, proposed the program in 1990, calling for new neighborhoods of homes affordable to people making close to the county median income. It was, Hanna said, designed to help people in various service industries, including government workers, afford to live near their workplaces.

But the program provoked fierce opposition. The County Council passed a scaled-back version, calling for six test productivity housing developments. But in 1994, the council narrowly rejected the first proposed development, in Damascus, and only narrowly approved

one in Olney earlier this year. Only months later, however, council voted to kill the entire program.

"What allowed the support of the affordable housing programs in Montgomery County always has been the moral position that this is good for all of us, that everyone is going to share in it countywide," Bauman said.

"When it became clear that communities like Potomac would be off-limits politically, not under the law but politically... it undercut any argument that government makes that they're doing this for your own good and the good of the county," he said.

Hanna said he had planned to place one productivity housing project in each of the 29 major planning areas.

By limiting it to six developments, Hanna said, the council "devastated the program from the beginning. . . . The whole idea was to make everybody contribute to the solution. They programmed it to fail."

Former County Council member Norman Christeller, now chairman of the MHP board, said the productivity housing program was fatally flawed.

"First of all, productivity housing doesn't make any sense as a name, you have to explain it," he said. "If you have to explain it, it's not a good name."

Plus, Christeller said, it tarnished the term "affordable housing" by targeting a segment of the population that could already afford to buy homes.

"Productivity housing was a red herring," he said. "What we need is a lot lower income housing than that."

New trend: rehabilitation

Productivity housing represented the traditional suburban model of affordable housing, Baldwin said, by focusing on building new subdivisions and neighborhoods. That model is less practical than it used to be.

There is less land, less public money, and greater public resistance to suburban sprawl than there used to be, Baldwin said.

"I think that the need [for new affordable housing] has not changed," said MHP Vice President Frankie Blackburn. "But the reality is that other needs and other issues have increased such that it is more difficult for the leadership to place a program on producing new housing."

Instead, Baldwin and Blackburn said, affordable housing advocates should look at rehabilitating existing structures.

"We ought to be concerned about the quality of housing in our older communities," Baldwin said.

An older apartment building or hotel can sometimes be bought at a reason-



Arie Economopoulos/Journal

Peg McRory of Ashton is "the mother of the MPDU program."

able cost and renovated with little opposition from the community, Baldwin said, adding that neighborhoods can benefit from the property improvements.

Rehabilitating an existing structure also means the developer doesn't have to install new roads and utilities, as it would in building new homes in previously undeveloped areas.

"That's where we all have to be going," Bauman agreed. "Infrastructure can't continue to go out and out."

There is some precedent for rehabilitating structures to create affordable housing. Two years ago, for exam-

ple, MHP converted an abandoned hotel in Rockville to create a housing complex called Beall's Grant. The agency is now working on Edinburg House, a run-down high-rise apartment building in Takoma Park.

"If the public sector hadn't intervened," Blackburn said, "it would have become increasingly a slum and have been torn down."

By rehabilitating housing, Blackburn said, MHP and other agencies can help keep older communities healthy, with a good mix of people, income levels and housing types.

Without that mix, Baldwin said, communities fracture into rich and

poor areas. He pointed to the stark contrast between the wealthy neighborhoods of Northwest Washington and the blighted and seemingly hopeless communities of Southeast.

"I kind of hope people will see it's in their self-interest to want to have healthy communities in Montgomery County," Baldwin said.

Moral high ground erodes

Whatever direction affordable housing takes, Baldwin said, advocates will need to cooperate more closely with residents of the communities where projects are proposed.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, the Housing Opportunities Commission "began to be viewed as the enemy by too many community groups in the county because of an arrogance of attitude," Bauman said.

"HOC began to come in with the attitude that we're on a mission from God so to question what we're doing or to challenge what we plan puts us on the moral high ground and the opponents on the moral low ground," Bauman said. "That doesn't get very far in the pragmatic world of land-use decisions."

Civic activists say they have been on the receiving end of high-handed government tactics.

"HOC historically has been very insensitive to neighborhood concerns," said John Robinson, president of the Allied Civic Group, which represents civic associations throughout southeastern Montgomery County. "They believe they have a divine mission."

Rick Ferrara, director of the HOC, admits that affordable housing activists

have sometimes been their own worst enemies.

"If you go on a crusade, approach them from the standpoint that God is on your side [it doesn't work]. . . . It's just fine for the religious community, but people in this job have to be very careful about that," Ferrara said.

In the current era, with government tightening spending and the public increasingly anxious about perceived threats to their communities, affordable housing agencies must be more sensitive and pragmatic, Ferrara said.

He pointed to a 1990 plan, created when he was head of the county's Department of Housing and Community Development, to build affordable housing in the Woodside Park neighborhood in Silver Spring. The county drew up the plans before showing them to the community.

The community reacted with fury and killed the plan.

"I can say that it was a mistake," Ferrara said. "We should have gone to the community first. Clearly what they perceived is that we were going behind the backs of the community, to sneak in. That was a mistake."

From now on, the county will have to try to reach out to community organizations from the start.

"I could say it is their moral responsibility to have housing on that site. . . . It might be true but it doesn't win over the community," Ferrara said.

"Maybe that worked 30 years ago," Bauman said. "It doesn't work now. . . . You can be liberal today and be successful, but it's hard to have that hard edge of the '60s and be successful. This is not the same county it was in 1968."

Wheaton activist defends housing position

PROJECT from A1

intelligent growth," Anderson said.

"We're going to be looking at alternatives for Wheaton," Anderson said. "We would love — love — to have Montgomery Housing Partnership buy [and rehabilitate] our apartment buildings. There are any number of them they could buy. They are better landlords than the slum landlords we have there now."

To avoid future ugly political battles, organizations such as MHP and the county's Housing Opportunities Com-

mission "need to develop a more systematic approach to what they need to do," said Allied Civic Association President John Robinson.

"They need to target their effort to situations where these projects benefit both" the community and the people who will be living in the affordable housing, Robinson said.

Despite her outspoken opposition to the MHP project, Anderson said she is committed to the idea of helping less fortunate people.

Opposition to the project "was based on its merits," she said. "It was ill-conceived."

Planning Board Chairman William Hussmann agreed.

"It had very poor access as designed," Hussmann said. "It would have contributed to storm water management [problems] in the existing neighborhood. I didn't think it was an attractive design. . . . I didn't sense a contribution to the greater community good in Wheaton."

Anderson also brushed aside suggestions that she and other opponents were motivated by racism or fear of having poor people living nearby.

"For some people that is true; some people have that fear," Anderson said.

"In the case of Wheaton, the majority of people have a more sophisticated understanding."

Instead, Anderson said, some of the opposition to this and other affordable housing projects stems from the increasing economic pressure on the middle class.

"The middle class has less money . . . and they may be saying why are my taxes going to subsidize people who are not going to contribute to the community," Anderson said.

"We want to help," Anderson said, "but we're feeling the pinch ourselves."

County families go 'a long way' on sweat equity

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people have that fear," Anderson said. "We have to help ourselves."

County families go 'a long way' on sweat equity

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around the county's median — \$68,660 per year for a family of four.

After years of saving and moving up through a series of rentals, condominiums, and townhouses, they recently bought a spacious new home in a subdivision in Olney.

"It's kind of a slap in the face for all our hard work . . . we don't want a government handout and we don't think it's necessary," she told the Montgomery County Council at a July public hearing on the bill to kill productivity housing.

Affordable housing advocates agree there are cheap homes out there, but say critics miss an important point.

People living on the economic margins can find homes, but "you choose between having to commute or living in an apartment that is not well-managed," said Frankie Blackburn, vice president of Montgomery Housing Partnership, an affordable housing nonprofit agency.

Jacqueline Hall, a 32-year-old single mother from Takoma Park, said public programs saved her and her four children from a life in public shelters. Six years ago, Hall sought help from the county's Housing Opportunities Com-

mission, which helped pay her rent under the federal Section 8 program.

"If it weren't for them, I wouldn't have been able to pay my rent," Hall said.

Today, Hall is still using Section 8, but she has gone from paying \$40 per month for rent to more than \$1,000 per month. She is working full time as an administrative assistant in Bethesda and is, with HOC help, saving to buy a house.

"I think I've come a long way," Hall said. "It took time. A lot of people don't realize that everyone needs someone. Whether you're rich or poor, whether you're young or old, you need a help-

ing hand."

But now that she's working full time and trying to make it on her own, Hall said she understands why some people are upset by affordable housing programs.

"Some people do abuse the system," Hall said, and hard-working people "get tired of being used."

There are, however "honest people out there," Hall said. "There are good people out there and that assistance should be there for them. Everybody can lose a job . . . you can become homeless. If you do, you are going to need help."

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