

Catholics claim victory after approval of affordable-housing measure

The Baltimore City Council approved a watered-down version of a long-fought-for inclusionary-housing bill June 11 and the city's Catholic community is claiming victory in gaining a law that will require more affordable homes for urban residents.

"It could have been stronger, but we had to do some compromising," said Father Richard T. Lawrence, pastor of St. Vincent de Paul, Baltimore, one of the legislation's more vocal supporters.

Aside from gaining a method of adding more affordable housing units in future city residential developments, Father Lawrence said he hasn't seen Baltimore Catholics galvanize on an issue with such passion since the civil rights campaigns in the 1960s.

"People in our parishes and from other religious groups really came together, because it's an issue they felt very strongly about," he said. "I haven't seen a broad-based coalition on an issue like this in Baltimore in a very long time."

The legislation - approved on a 12-1 vote - calls for all housing developments receiving city tax breaks or discounted land to set aside 20 percent of its units for moderate- to low-income homes.

In the next 18 months, developers who benefit from zoning changes also will be required to reserve 10 percent for affordable housing units and builders of projects with 30 or more dwellings must price 10 percent of the homes within the reach of families with modest earnings.

Fifth-District Councilwoman Rochelle "Rikki" Spector cast the lone dissenting ballot. Councilmen Edward Reisinger and Keiffer Jackson Mitchell - a candidate for mayor - were not present for the vote.

By requiring developers to set aside affordable housing in higher-priced neighborhoods, city and religious leaders hope to keep lower-income projects from being segregated in certain pockets of the city and reduce the number of neighborhoods labeled ghettos.

If Mayor Sheila Dixon signs the bill - as expected - Baltimore will become the fourth Maryland jurisdiction with an affordable housing law. The others are Montgomery, Frederick and Howard counties.

Critics fear the mandate will discourage developers from building in the city - instead, moving their residential projects to nearby Baltimore, Harford or Anne Arundel counties.

Catholic organizations - including Beyond the Boundaries - egged on legions of city parishioners to write their council members, attend rallies and show up at city workshops and meetings to exemplify their political might.

Champions of the affordable-housing concept feared the Baltimore housing market would become as expensive as Washington's and price lower-income families out of most neighborhoods.

"Baltimore can not afford to wait for affordable housing," said Council President Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, who added the measure onto the June 11 council meeting agenda at the last minute to fast track the bill to final passage. "This bill is two years in the making."

Originally, the legislation provided \$10 million a year for a trust fund for building subsidies, but mandatory funding was stripped out of the bill by the Land Use and Transportation Committee.

The city council did fund \$2 million this year to help offset costs for developers including affordable units in their projects, but when the money runs out and the city can't offer incentives, a loophole in the bill forgives builders their low-income housing obligation.

"We had to give up on the mandatory funding, because it just wasn't going to be passable if we didn't," Father Lawrence said. "It's not a perfect bill, but it's an improvement and a move in the right direction."