

Housing Forum Puts Onus on State

By Ed Moorhouse

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MOUNT LAUREL - The future of affordable housing in New Jersey is uncertain, but it's up to state leaders to clarify the picture in the coming years, according to a panel of planners who addressed the topic Wednesday.

Moorestown Ecumenical Neighborhood Development hosted an affordable housing symposium at the Doubletree Hotel on Fellowship Road for about 60 people. The event was open to the public.

MEND is a private, nonprofit, faith-based housing development organization founded by Moorestown churches in 1969. It hosted the symposium as part of its 40th anniversary celebration.

State Assembly Speaker Joseph J. Roberts Jr. joined three planners to discuss the history and future of affordable housing in the state.

"The more affordable housing we develop in New Jersey, the better," said Roberts, an advocate who sponsored a bill passed last year that overhauled state housing laws.

Roberts, who is not seeking re-election this fall, said affordable housing is a polarizing issue.

"I have seen firsthand how politicized this issue can become," he said. "It's easy to demagogue an issue like affordable housing. It's easy to talk about it in economic terms that are threatening. It's easy to

whisper about it in racial terms that are offensive. But it's a much tougher issue to have a very thoughtful, reasoned discussion about that reaches the right conclusion."

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Philip B. Caton

Roberts said affordable housing will be a major issue during November's gubernatorial election.

"We have to try real hard to make sure we continue to have a thoughtful debate about it," he said.

The state Council on Affordable Housing mandates that municipalities provide low-income housing based on the amount of development expected over the next 10 years.

The council's new regulations, known as third-round rules, require municipalities to provide one affordable unit for every five market-rate units constructed in their towns, and one unit for every 16 jobs created by a commercial or industrial development.

Based on those guidelines, the council expects about 115,000 new affordable units to be built by 2018.

The council already has approved several municipal housing plans, but other towns have challenged the requirements.

Planner Alan Mallach, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., said historically the COAH rules have worked.

"For all its flaws and aggravations, the COAH process has produced more affordable housing than any method used by any other state," Mallach said. "The sky has not fallen in. I would argue very strongly that there is no evidence that New Jersey is a worse-planned or less environmentally sound state today because of COAH."



But Mallach said the future of affordable housing is difficult to predict because of the lack of development applications, the downtrodden economy, limited funding and the state's fiscal constraints.

"I think there's a huge element of uncertainty as we go forward and try to figure out what's going to happen next," he said.

David Kinsey, a planner from the Princeton-based firm Kinsey and Hand, said the state should do more to build affordable housing.

"One way to achieve that goal would be to simplify the fair-share methodology and learn from our decades of experience," Kinsey said.

He said a municipality's affordable housing obligation should be fairly determined by looking at each town's land-use and fiscal situations.

"In short, it would be a form of pure growth share to work towards the huge housing need we have in the state for families that are cost-burdened," Kinsey said.

Philip Caton, a planner with **Clarke Caton Hintz** in Trenton, called on state leaders to take more action.

"The leadership has to come from the top, and I think it's critical that the state plan be elevated so

that these decisions aren't argued about, but rather there is some kind of central command over the way these polices are adjudicated," Caton said.

Mallach said he believes affordable housing practices could be "gutted" and reinvented over the next several years, but that a more likely scenario is that the practices will be upheld.

"There will be some tweaks and more lawsuits, but life will go on and the third-round rules more or less in their current fashion will remain the basic ground rules for affordable housing in the next five to 10 years," he said.

"It's less a question of what we do with the Fair Housing Act, but what is the state going to do to think broadly about what kind of policy we need and can afford?"