

## **Group asks candidates to back its agenda: Affordable housing, improved mass transportation advocated by PATH**

By Larry Carson, The Baltimore Sun

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Oct. 11--A community-based group working through Howard County churches to promote affordable housing and better mass transportation and youth services is pushing political candidates to sign on.

**People Acting Together in Howard** (PATH) drew more than 400 people from more than 20 county churches to Oakland Mills High School on Sunday to ask candidates for county executive and council to support its initiatives.

Two of those initiatives would represent a big change in county policy, greatly upgrading the county's commitment to having affordable housing for working families.

Among the six questions the group posed were two that caused most candidates to answer "no." One requested a commitment to require that at least 25 percent of new homes built in every zone countywide be reserved for moderate-income families, which could create up to 3,600 new subsidized units in the county, and the other would devote \$30 million a year to create a Howard County Housing Trust to buy land and promote subsidized housing.

County planners and housing officials have argued that requiring subsidized housing in the rural west, far from public transportation, might not work. Currently, the county requires 10 percent to 15 percent of new homes in most eastern county zones be for moderate-income families making up to about \$60,000 a year.

The other PATH requests were for the county to reserve more land along U.S. 1 for mixed-use developments, to reduce waiting times for Howard Transit users from one hour to 30 minutes, to convene a summit on youth issues and agree to meet with PATH representatives at least three times a year.

Jackie Roberson, a member of St. John the Evangelist Roman Catholic Church, described how her daughter and son-in-law, both Howard County teachers, rise at 4:30 a.m. each day with their 18-month-old baby so they can commute from their northern Baltimore County home to work. They could not afford a house in Howard County, she said.

Joyce Baer, a retiree who doesn't drive, described how inconvenient it can be to use the bus system. "A 15-minute errand can take three hours," she said, though there are plans to reduce the wait between buses on some Columbia routes in March.

Of the three candidates for county executive, only C. Stephen Wallis, who did not attend the Sunday evening meeting, agreed to support all the group's requests.

Democrat Ken Ulman and Republican Christopher J. Merdon, who both attended, said they could not commit to spending \$30 million a year on housing or to requiring that 25 percent of all new housing be for moderate income families.

"One hundred twenty million dollars in four years is not reasonable or doable," Merdon said.

Ulman said no to the specifics but yes to the goals.

Among County Council candidates, three Democrats -- Mary Kay Sigaty of District 4, Jen Terrasa of District 3 and Don Dunn of District 5 -- agreed to all the group's requests. Dunn did not attend the meeting.

Tony Salazar, a Republican running in District 1, had the most "no" answers -- four out of six. He did agree to support convening a summit on youth issues and meeting with PATH three times per year.