

Ulman backs housing fund: Money would be used to expand inventory of affordable homes

By Larry Carson, The Baltimore Sun
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Nov. 21--A coalition of Howard County church and community groups won a promise from County Executive Ken Ulman to create a separate housing fund to allow quick action on affordable-housing opportunities.

The group, **People Acting Together In Howard**, or PATH, is pushing Ulman and other elected officials for a range of changes to provide and preserve more lower-cost housing, public transportation and youth employment opportunities.

At a packed meeting of about 250 people Sunday night at the Meeting House interfaith center in Oakland Mills, Ulman mostly agreed with the PATH members' requests on all those issues, including the housing fund.

Ulman welcomed the group's activism, seeming to see the members, many of whom wore bright green PATH T-shirts, as natural allies.

"So many things we're talking about need your bodies, your presence. There are many folks who don't want us to build anything anywhere," he said. Having large numbers of advocates at meetings can help reassure elected officials who are sometimes beset by critics, he said.

"Your presence is so important," he said.

Ulman has been under pressure to do more to implement a series of recommendations from a citizens task force on affordable housing that delivered a report one year ago. So far, few changes have been made. The idea of a ready pot of money that could be used as opportunities arose was one of the task force's unfulfilled suggestions.

"I am very much in favor of creating a Housing Initiative Fund. We will get this done," Ulman said.

He added, however, that the idea may need approval by the General Assembly, and that there is no money for the fund yet.

But PATH organizer Hector A. Rodriguez said his group is satisfied.

"We can fund it later," he said.

Tim Sosinski, an architect and co-chairman of the task force, said, "If they institute it, it will be a significant step," though not the comprehensive new approach for which advocates have pressed.

County Housing Director Stacy L. Spann said the creation of a fund "would allow us to move quickly" if an opportunity arose.

Christiane M. Howey, controller of a family business called Microwave Telemetry Inc., said affordable housing is a big issue for business. Her firm has had difficulty hiring professional engineers despite good pay and benefits, she said, because of the high cost of housing in the county.

Montgomery County alone in Maryland has a Housing Initiative Fund used for projects such as buying or renovating older apartments and building new affordable units. The \$30 million fund, established in 1989, is replenished with the annual equivalent of 2.5 percent of county property tax revenues, said Stephanie Killian, a county spokeswoman. It also is funded with one-quarter of the proceeds if any county property is sold, a tax on apartment conversions to condominiums and loan repayments, she said.

Ulman also agreed to back a local General Assembly bill sponsored by several county legislators that would give mobile-home park residents a better chance to buy the land their units sit on if redevelopment is proposed.

LaMona Linder, 69, a resident of Capital Mobile Home Park on U.S. 1, told the group she and other residents fear the kind of redevelopment that has overtaken at least four other parks in recent years.

"I do not wish to live in a box within a box, which is what an apartment represents to me," she said. Linder bought her three-bedroom, two-bath unit for \$5,000 four years ago, renovated it, and pays \$585 a month rent on her lot, she said.

Ulman also agreed to work with school officials to determine the cost of PATH's request that they provide after-school-activity bus transportation for students without vehicles or rides home, and to convene lenders and mortgage brokers to head off the possibility of widespread foreclosures on adjustable-rate mortgages in the county.

Francisco Davis, an Oakland Mills High School senior who lives in Owen Brown, reinforced the transportation point by telling the group he had walked to the meeting Sunday night because he had no ride and bus service was not available.

In addition, Ulman agreed to meet with business leaders and employers to help provide more summer jobs and mentoring for county young people.

Ulman did not agree to another PATH request, however -- to change county law to conform with his administration's policy on where moderate-income housing may be built.

Last year the council, including Ulman, approved a change to allow developers to move their required subsidized housing away from their primary development sites in exchange for providing more units, if county housing officials agreed.

Ulman said he is committed to mixing such units amid retail-priced homes, but he said he did not want to change the law and eliminate the ability to move units in an unusual circumstance.