



The Times

COAH alternative needs work

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STAFF WRITER

The Assembly was right last week to hold off on a vote to abolish the Council on Affordable Housing and its 25-year-old mission to guarantee the availability of homes for low-income families in New Jersey

The Assembly's deliberation is in contrast with the Senate's quick passage of the measure. Assemblyman Jerry Green, chairman of the Housing and Local Government Committee, delayed a vote to give panel members more time to consider the complex legislation.

Testifying before the panel, Community Affairs Commissioner Lori Grifa said the legislation comprises three goals: "One, end COAH and the madness of the arbitrary quota system that paid dividends to lawyers and planners, cost towns thousands of dollars and stymied sensible growth. Two, empower municipalities to make their own decisions about land use and housing on a local level. Three, create clear guidelines for affordable housing that encourage achievable results."

We agree that the present system, set in motion by the state Supreme Court's Mount Laurel decision, is capricious and has not fulfilled the promise of providing an opportunity for all to afford a life and home in New Jersey. It should be replaced.

But the proffered solution is not the best course. And the "clear guidelines" are anything but clear.

Intended to simplify the rules mandating inclusion of affordable housing as part of any development, the legislation would require that up to 10 percent of any new residential development of 20 or more units be set aside for low-income residents.

And it deems about half of New Jersey's municipalities "exclusionary," meaning they must add affordable housing units. But the formula's practical inconsistencies abound. For instance, while Princeton Borough and Township are considered "inclusionary," and therefore exempt, Ewing is deemed exclusionary. The bottom line is that, in some cases, towns that already have a diversity of housing stock will be required to do more than wealthier towns.

Another unsuitable aspect of the plan is that it would allow builders to slough their affordable housing responsibility by constructing affordable units elsewhere, making a contribution to rehabilitating existing low-income housing or paying fees into the towns' affordable housing trust fund. That continues the COAH loophole that has resulted in so much racial and economic segregation in this state.

More than 100 groups, including the state's Catholic bishops, the Sierra Club, Habitat for Humanity, the NAACP, the Coalition for Affordable Housing and the Environment, the Housing and Community Development Network of New Jersey and the Fair Share Housing Center, have urged the Legislature to come up with a better solution than that represented by this bill. We call on the Legislature to hold hearings to cull the input of those who address affordable housing issues every day.

We agree with Kevin Walsh of the Fair Share Housing Center that, as it stands, this bill will "strengthen the hand of municipalities that have shut their doors to lower-income New Jerseyans."