

Panel blocks new affordable housing guidelines

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STATE HOUSE BUREAU

A three-judge appellate panel has blocked the implementation of new Christie administration affordable housing guidelines, granting an application by a housing advocacy group for low and moderate income families.

The panel yesterday granted an application by the Fair Share Housing Center, which argued the new rules must go through a public process, to stay the implementation of five new procedures written by the Department of Community Affairs.

The move comes during a transition period for affordable housing policy. Gov. Chris Christie abolished the 12-member Council on Affordable Housing as of Aug. 29, transferring all of its duties to the Department of Community Affairs.

The panel also denied Fair Share's other application, which was to stop Christie's reorganization plan entirely. The court will hear oral arguments on that issue Feb. 15 in Trenton.

Christie and Community Affairs Commissioner Lori Grifa have touted the reorganization as a way to reduce bureaucratic log-jam and red tape. The department's replacement procedures, implemented on Sept. 15, were designed to expedite affordable housing processes for municipalities.

But Kevin Walsh, associate director of the Fair Share Housing Center, said the rules gave towns discretion to duck their affordable housing obligations.

"It's really a consolidation of power with little or no public involvement," Walsh said. "We want a system that works, not a system that lets towns do whatever they want."

Mike Cerra, a policy analyst for the state League of Municipalities, said the league supports soliciting public input on the new guidelines, and encouraged the department to move forward with the new regulations as soon as possible.

Fair Share Housing Center is also challenging Christie's decision to eliminate the Council on Affordable Housing. Oral arguments will be heard on Wednesday, Feb. 15 in Trenton.

Often criticized for being overly bureaucratic, COAH was responsible for implementing the state's Fair Housing Act.

Christie, as well as members of the legislature, have been seeking changes to affordable housing rules for months. Legislation abolishing COAH made it to the governor's desk earlier this year, but he conditionally vetoed it based on other aspects of the bill. Christie instead issued the reorganization plan to abolish the council in June, giving legislators 60 days to block it.