

Corzine Should Advocate For Affordable Housing

Home News Tribune Online 01/28/07

In 2004, the administration of then Gov. James E. McGreevey, who had ignored both the spirit and the letter of the state's affordable-housing laws as Woodbridge mayor, promulgated new regulations for the Council on Affordable Housing. The revised regulations were so egregious and so disingenuous, they gutted the state's landmark Mount Laurel rulings, even as they heaped promises upon housing advocates. Last week, thankfully, the McGreevey administration's charade was revealed when an appeals court struck down the revised regulations. The court agreed the administration's reasoning "defied comprehension" and was based on lousy data. It said the rules discriminated against families and ignored facts. And it said the state's new rules would not result in nearly enough affordable housing. As the court put it, "The rules frustrate, rather than further, a realistic opportunity for affordable housing."

The good news is that Gov. Jon S. Corzine seems more committed to affordable housing than his predecessor; he has pledged to build 100,000 affordable housing units in the next 10 years. The bad news is that Corzine has kept the woman responsible for devising the lousy regulations in the first place. Susan Bass Levin, like McGreevey, is a former mayor and an opponent of affordable housing, and is now the head of the Department of Community Affairs and therefore the Council on Affordable Housing.

As the spokeswoman for the Corzine administration on issues of housing, Levin has struck a more conciliatory and progressive tone than she ever did under McGreevey. Here's hoping she, and the new governor, mean to live up to that tone.

The ball is now in the Corzine administration's court. It could appeal this ruling to the Supreme Court; or it otherwise has been given six months to revise its regulations. People on all sides recognize that time is of the essence. There is, after all, only a limited amount of developable land left in the state, and while the amount of affordable housing built since 2004 has been minimal, market-rate building has boomed, meaning there is ever less space available to correct the inequities.

Appealing the ruling would waste time and, given the language of this judgment and the Supreme Court's history in this matter, seems unlikely to result in a ruling more favorable to the government, or at least to Levin. It is vital, therefore, that Corzine seize the opportunity to dispense with the flawed regulations of his predecessor that run counter to his own goals — advocates estimate the McGreevey rules would produce just 12,000 affordable units over their life, 88,000 fewer than Corzine has proposed — and to craft a new affordable housing framework. It is difficult to overstate how important such regulations would be, both to the workers who are in need of more affordable living spaces — and those range from police officers and teachers to restaurant and lawn-care employees — and to the state's constant struggle to achieve environmentally sustainable growth.

As ground-breaking as the Mount Laurel rulings were, implementation of them always has been flawed, mostly because the state has lacked the will to override municipal governments' traditional hold over issues pertaining to planning and zoning. For the sake of the state as a whole, Corzine must overcome that queasiness. It is beyond time for the state to have more

authority in determining how it will develop, otherwise New Jersey is headed for environmental, social and economic instability.