



Build It, They Will Come

Sunday, January 28, 2007

RECORD EDITORIAL STAFF

NORTH JERSEY communities may have to fling their doors open wider to affordable housing. That is the essence of a court decision last week on the state's affordable-housing rules. It is also probably the last thing many North Jersey local officials want to hear.

Mayors and other municipal officials around the state are understandably concerned. They don't want to be forced to give up their few remaining green spaces to unsightly, high-density developments just for the sake of adding a few affordable-housing units.

But this decision is a good one. New Jersey's affordable-housing policies are deeply flawed. The court ordered the state to come up with fairer rules within six months. The state should take that opportunity to devise policies that could truly meet the goals of the landmark Mount Laurel rulings by the state Supreme Court in the 1970s and 1980s.

The Mount Laurel goals remain critical to the future of New Jersey: Stop the concentration of housing for poor and moderate-income families in urban areas. Sprinkle such housing in rural areas and suburbs around the state.

People of moderate means deserve as much as anyone else in New Jersey to live near their jobs, their families and public transportation. They deserve the opportunity to live in good school districts and low-crime neighborhoods. They deserve not to be confined by the size of their income to living in areas with concentrated poverty, with all of the social problems such concentration brings.

The Mount Laurel rulings were supposed to end the practice of suburban communities deliberately shutting out developments that would be attractive and affordable to low- and moderate-income households. But the effort has to a large degree failed.

A big problem has been the state's rules for implementing the court decisions. These rules have always been far from perfect. But the latest incarnation, completed three years ago, were the worst. It is these rules the appeals court struck down.

The appeals court judges deserve credit for sticking to the principles of Mount Laurel. They said the state's rules deliberately undercounted the number of new affordable units needed in the state. That eased the pressure on municipalities but cheated thousands of people who need decent, reasonably priced homes.

The judges also rightly said towns should no longer be allowed to discriminate against families with children by restricting half their affordable housing to seniors. Municipal officials may claim they merely want to meet the needs of older residents on fixed incomes. But that can mask their true intention: to restrict housing for families with school-age children, who add to a community's education costs.

North Jersey needs more affordable housing. That does not mean communities have to build on every green space. It does not mean they have to allow the spread of ugly, outsized apartment complexes. There are creative and environmentally sound ways to boost the supply of reasonably priced homes. Existing housing

can be converted to affordable units. Non-profit as well as for-profit developers can be invited to submit proposals. Affordable developments can be concentrated around train stations and bus depots.

State officials must recognize what low- and middle income families already know: New Jersey needs more affordable housing, a lot more.

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