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Feuding Won't Build Housing

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A coalition of affordable housing advocates, builders and civil rights groups has asked Gov. Jon Corzine to appoint an independent person to oversee the rewriting of the Council on Affordable Housing rules that were struck down last month by a state appeals court.

More specifically, they don't want state Community Affairs Commissioner Susan Bass Levin, who chairs COAH, in charge of deliberations over the new rules, which must be revised within six months, according to the court.

The plea should not be summarily dismissed even though it seems to be fueled by long-standing bitterness between Levin and housing advocates.

As head of the Department of Community Affairs for both the Corzine and McGreevey administrations, Levin has made many enemies. Some called for her resignation following the court decision, which found that the rules hindered, not fostered, development of affordable housing.

But if the objective is to build affordable housing, getting mired in old conflicts and personal animosities isn't going to advance the goal.

Some advocates for affordable housing argue that Levin, former mayor of Cherry Hill, is overly sympathetic to suburban mayors who resist efforts to build low- and moderate- income housing. They point to an incident during the McGreevey administration in which two members of COAH were removed, which they saw as an attempt by Levin to stack the deck against housing advocates.

They also accuse her of footdragging in writing the COAH regulations that were ultimately declared unconstitutional. Even the appeals court described the delay as "dramatic and inexplicable."

Most telling, perhaps, is that in the past two years nearly 300 towns have presented affordable housing plans to COAH, but only four of those plans have been approved.

Levin, however, notes that under her watch 22,000 units of affordable housing have been built. While many of those units are occupied by elderly, single people, not the families envisioned by housing advocates, they are evidence of some progress.

The question now is whether the goal is to continue name calling or to build affordable housing.

If more housing and less litigation is the goal, why not name an independent person, such as a retired judge, to work with COAH staff and Levin, housing advocates, builders and mayors to develop the new rules? Someone who is respected by all could, in effect, negotiate between the warring sides.

Forcing the resignation of Levin or pushing her aside, as delicious as that might seem to those who are angry at the slow pace, will only further delay the building of housing.