

OPINION: Fairfax County Needs a New Affordable Housing Policy

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FairfaxTimes.com
December 8, 2009*

As we face the twin challenges of tighter county budgets and greater demand for human services, we need an "affordable housing" policy that focuses our available resources on those most in need. In each of the next 30 years, Fairfax County taxpayers will spend \$6 million annually on debt financing for the Wedgewood housing complex. Due to government ownership, monthly rents at Wedgewood are several hundred dollars below market rate, making them "affordable." None of those units serve the homeless, but nearly 80 percent -- 537 out of 672 units -- are earmarked for households with incomes higher than \$50,000 per year.

With the monies generated by the Penny Fund for Affordable Housing, 1,809 units of "affordable housing," including Wedgewood, have been preserved, at a cost of \$85.3 million. Few of these units are accessible to people with physical disabilities or serve those with significant mental illness or intellectual disabilities. None directly serve the homeless. Instead, tax dollars are focused on the "working" or "middle" classes so they can afford to live in this county. Moreover, while studies predict the need for 65,000 or more working and middle class housing units in the coming decade, our "affordable housing" program has only preserved a fraction of that amount, and at significant cost. The fact is government-owned housing cannot meet the housing needs of the working and middle classes. Zoning changes that permit innovative housing projects and tax credits for renovating existing private sector housing would better meet that goal. Scarce tax dollars should be directed at those most in need.

The Community Services Board has identified 3,000 extremely low-income Fairfax residents with disabilities and mental illness who, over time, are at risk of becoming homeless. Of these, 129 were identified earlier this year as literally living in the woods or on the streets. As identified in the Board-endorsed Beeman Commission report, stable housing is the first step toward treating those with mental illness and substance abuse. Because county housing funds go to the middle class, the CSB is forced to use its resources on housing, draining scarce treatment funds.

Last month, I proposed that \$2 million from the Penny Fund should be transferred to the CSB, which, working in conjunction with the Office to End Homelessness and its nonprofit partners, could house 200 of our most needy. This program would then free CSB funds for the treatment services for which they were originally intended. Yes, those receiving these services may never become fully self-sufficient, but we can provide them with the tools to live relatively secure lives, and the county would make considerable progress in meeting its 10-year goal to end homelessness here. We would also meet the moral imperative of helping those who cannot fully provide for themselves.

It's time to focus our housing funds on those who face serious medical challenges and are the most in need, and to stop using taxpayer dollars to provide housing subsidies to the working and middle classes.

John Cook (R) represents the Braddock District on the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors. The plans, however, are "dependent on finding the money for this project," said Randy Bickers, executive director of the Charlottesville Redevelopment and Housing Authority (CRHA). In fact, the estimated cost for the proposed 558 units is \$115.5 million, which the firm said would be a mix of bonds, grants and loans.