

# City Council Approves Senior Affordable Housing Project

*By George Bromley  
Falls Church Times  
March 22, 2010*

Tonight the Falls Church City Council approved three measures to advance the construction of The Wilden senior affordable housing project at 350 South Washington Street. All passed by 6-1 vote with Councilman Nader Baroukh the lone dissenter.

The Council granted the project a special exception for mixed use construction in a commercial zone, a \$2 million, 15-year interest bearing loan, and a real estate tax exemption. The vote in favor of the 66 unit project is the first step forward in the proposed City Center which has been dormant since 2008.

Mr. Baroukh cited Falls Church's difficult financial situation as a reason for his vote. "When we'll be talking about a 15 to 20 percent tax increase later this evening it's irresponsible for the City to acquire additional liabilities at this time." He also expressed opposition to stand alone housing projects, stating that "our seniors deserve better. They should be integrated throughout the community, not segregated."

Councilman Dave Snyder, who frequently votes with Baroukh, did not concur on either point, saying he saw very little financial risk to the City and that most of the seniors currently residing in affordable housing units had expressed a willingness to move to the proposed building. "It's clear we need something to jump start economic development. I believe this will reduce the tax burden for everyone due to the changes that have been made in the project. If we don't do this now we will look back in two or three years and ask ourselves why we didn't. I think it's in the public interest."

Vice Mayor Hal Lippman, reiterating his concern that Falls Church was becoming an economic gated community, concurred. "There's no question in my mind this is the right thing to do and that it's in the best interest of the City."

Councilman Dan Maller was sharply critical of Mr. Baroukh, attacking his impartiality and stating that "the project applicant has endured a year or more of incremental NIMBYism" (i.e., "not in my backyard"). Mr. Maller subsequently apologized to Mr. Baroukh, who accepted the apology.

Mr. Baroukh's views did find support from two candidates for City Council. Both Johanna Barry and Ira Kaylin spoke against approval of the project. Ms. Barry said that she did not see the issue before the Council as one of moral imperative but of economic development in a difficult time and the long term financial impacts of the decision.

Mr. Kaylin described the financial transaction as "very expensive to the City and not well disclosed." Pointing to the prospect of an 18% increase in property taxes he stated "What about all the elderly people here who have to pay that tax and who have had their pensions savaged or are on fixed income. Do they have to leave the City to make way for affordable housing?"

Most other citizens spoke in favor of the project, including Thomas Sawner, owner of the adjacent property at 360 South Washington. Mr. Sawner, who had previously opposed construction due to the impact it would have on his building, called it "the right project at the right time."