

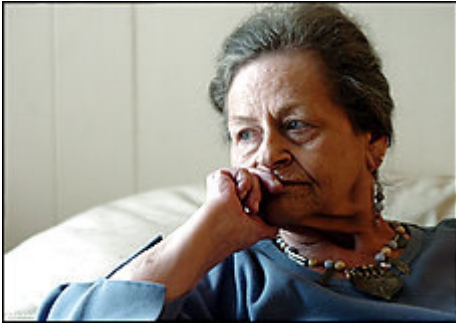
Affording Gaithersburg

Residents Divided Over Proposal for Moderate-Income Housing

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Wednesday, October 25, 2006; B01



Jacynth Hughes-Senning can't afford to buy a home. The proposal is "a good stopgap, but it is minimal," she says. (By Ricky Carioti -- The Washington)

For Edgardo Garcia, an immigrant from El Salvador, an affordable housing proposal under consideration by Gaithersburg officials could give him the opportunity to buy a home after six years of renting an apartment.

For Bob Drzyzgula, a homeowner and 17-year city resident, the proposal could mean more "slums" for a downtown that many say sorely needs upscale businesses and homes.

These opposing views underscore the culture clash dividing Gaithersburg, a city of about 60,000 residents whose suburban comforts have given way to the urban challenges of an economically and racially diverse community. As the City Council considers a proposal to require developers to set aside affordable housing for moderate-income and middle-class families, it is also struggling to find a location for an employment center for day laborers, many of them immigrants.

"It's not this little city anymore," said Grace Rivera-Oven, who has a local cable show and has been a vocal supporter of the day-laborer center. "I think [there's] a socioeconomic division, and you add . . . different people from different places, and I guess it's kind of a little bit of a 'not in my back yard' kind of thing. People are threatened by it."

Many residents think that the city has gone too far to accommodate recently arrived immigrants, legal or illegal, who are attracted to Gaithersburg's abundance of rental apartments. The city's population is at least 20 percent Latino. At a council meeting this

month, some of the people who spoke in opposition to the center also voiced objections to the proposed affordable housing policy.

If approved, the policy would require developers to set aside 7.5 percent of owner-occupied units for moderate-income households -- those earning 60 to 80 percent of the area median income of \$90,300. Another 7.5 percent would be so-called "workforce housing" -- for those making 80 to 120 percent of the median income. For rental units, developers would have to make 15 percent of the units moderately priced.

The council is expected to vote on the measure early next month.

Gaithersburg, an incorporated city about 13 miles north of Washington, is exempt from Montgomery County's requirement that developers reserve 12.5 percent of new homes for moderate-income households and that 10 percent of residences around Metro stops be reserved for workforce housing.

"My wife and I walk through Olde Towne Gaithersburg very often, and, to be frank, it's a little bit above a slum," resident Clark Day said at the hearing. "I don't see why it is that people who can't afford to live in Montgomery County have to get a handout so that they can be close to where they work. I just don't get that."

That kind of rhetoric draws a sharp rebuke from housing advocates.

"These are working-class people," activist Patty Kaczmarek said at the hearing. "They're working, a lot of them, for below minimum wage. They are holding down two jobs. They are not lazy, they are not stupid and they are not trying to get a handout from anybody."

The debate in Gaithersburg reflects what is happening across the region, City Council member Michael A. Sesma said. As more people are priced out of the inner suburbs, they are moving farther out in search of affordable housing. At the same time, the region is attracting more immigrants.

"I think they are growing pains," he said. "We've changed from a suburban, semi-agricultural area to a semi-urban, semi-suburban area that is continuing to grow."

Gaithersburg officials estimate that the city has about 4,000 affordable rental apartments. Although the housing boom has waned, developers continue to express interest in redeveloping some of those buildings. Housing advocates worry that they would be converted into ritzier, more expensive homes, displacing poorer residents.

Garcia, 34, lives in Broadstone Apartments, considered by the city to be an affordable housing complex, with his father and disabled mother. He earns about \$28,000 a year as an assistant director of plant operations at a hospital and struggles

to make his share of the \$1,000 rent and \$400 in utilities while sending money to his two children in El Salvador.

It could soon get more difficult. City officials said that the Texas-based owners of Broadstone have asked the council to let them add another floor to the three-story building in case they decide to redevelop.

"It's hard," Garcia said on a recent night, while sitting on his couch, the sound of cars whizzing by on Route 355 drowning out a Spanish-language news program on television. "The houses are really expensive, and I have my responsibility in El Salvador."

The proposal has critics among housing advocates and longtime residents alike.

Leaders of Action in Montgomery (AIM), a network of congregations that lobbies for affordable housing, say they are disappointed that the proposal for new moderate-income households is not at least as stringent as the county's requirement.

"We're angered and disappointed that the city of Gaithersburg is not protecting its residents," said Alisa Glassman, lead organizer for AIM.

"It's a good stopgap, but it is minimal," said Jacynth Hughes-Senning, who lives in Gaither House apartments, a property designated as affordable. The proposed affordable housing policy would do little for her. Each month, she receives \$785 in Social Security benefits and \$218 from her retirement benefits -- not enough to buy a home.

But longtime residents, and even some city leaders, say that the city has more affordable housing than any other part of the county and that imposing a requirement on developers would drive them away. If the county adopts an affordable housing requirement, some say that Olde Towne Gaithersburg, a hodgepodge of mom-and-pop shops, should be exempted to allow for more upscale development.

"What they're looking at is doing something that will potentially act as a disincentive in an area that is having a great deal of difficulty attracting development at all," said Drzyzgula, who is critical of the day-laborer center but does not think that the center is related to the affordable housing debate.

The council is considering excluding Olde Towne from the plan or asking developers there to pay a fee to be exempt from the proposal's requirements. That money would go into a fund the city would use to pay for affordable housing programs.

City Council member Henry F. Marraffa Jr., who is running for Montgomery County Council, said he supports the exemption. What Old Towne needs is the redevelopment of the existing housing stock, which is old and poorly maintained, he said. He worries that

the slackening of the real estate market will make it more difficult for Gaithersburg to attract builders.

"What we are beginning to develop, what someone brought up the other night, is slums," he said in an interview.

Marraffa said the city should offer developers incentives to build affordable housing, not obligate them to do it.

"The last thing you want is a city that is spiraling down and is not being revitalized," he said.

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