

Faith Activists Champion Inclusionary Zoning in Baltimore

BY HELENE F. PERRY

Maryland laws firmly fixed Baltimore city boundaries almost 100 years ago. Unable to expand its footprint to encompass new suburbs, the city has been left with a declining population, diminished tax base and significant disinvestment. While Baltimore has benefited from the recent housing boom, market-driven development occurred mainly at high-end Inner Harbor and waterfront projects where condos are priced above \$500,000. There is a serious lack of decent affordable housing in the city.

In the spring of 2005, the city council created an Inclusionary Housing Task Force to craft legislation that would create more affordable housing. The task force consulted experts and held

port was needed to empower elected officials to reject attempts to delay or weaken the bill.

Faith Community Lobbies for Bill

Much of the community support needed to pass the bill came from “Beyond the Boundaries,” a unique program sponsored by the Baltimore Archdiocese. Begun in the mid-1990s as parish-based discussion sessions, Beyond the Boundaries promotes social equity by assisting parish and inter-parish groups to “collaboratively consider and promote policies and practices to achieve economic, ethnic, racial and social desegregation and equity.” Through discussion groups and workshops, Beyond the Boundaries increases awareness of Catholic social teaching and the Church’s role in civic and political matters. Factors affecting the socio-economic health of the entire region are considered from a faith perspective, together with individuals’ responsibility to work collaboratively for the best interest of all.

Of the many social justice issues raised in the discussion groups,

the lack of affordable housing was recognized as a critical factor affecting the quality of neighborhood schools, access to jobs, crime, and healthcare issues. As the Inclusionary Housing Task Force began its work, it was clear that this provided an opportunity for Beyond the

Boundaries participants to engage people from all over Baltimore who understood affordable housing issues and who were eager for an opportunity to advocate for a workable solution.

Beyond the Boundaries leaders, ably organized by program managers Harriett Kesler and Brother Jerry O’Leary, joined an inclusionary housing coalition that provided the organized support needed to move the legislation through the review process. At almost every step of the way, special interests tried to delay or substantially weaken the bill. Beyond the Boundaries advocates brought fellow parishioners to key hearings, initiated phone calls and emails, and wrote hundreds of letters of support to their council representatives. They were able to draw on a network of active pastors and parish leaders whenever evidence of popular support was needed.

Key to the process was the wholehearted public support given by Baltimore’s Urban Bishop Denis Madden and the Program Director of Beyond the Boundaries, Bishop Mitchell Rozanski.

Bill Passes Overwhelmingly

On June 11, with the support of the mayor and city council president, the inclusionary zoning bill was fast-tracked to a final hearing and passed by a vote of 11 to 1.

Success was gratifying, but much more remains to be done. Beyond the Boundary advocates continue to monitor implementation of the bill and to press for additional means to increase affordable housing in mixed-income communities in both Baltimore and the surrounding region.

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“Beyond the Boundaries” joins coalition members to rally in front of City Hall

open hearings for residents, developers, city officials and housing advocates. In December 2006, they introduced an inclusionary zoning bill to the city council. While less comprehensive than what housing advocates originally hoped for, it was a good first step, a workable compromise that could create a significant number of affordable units while providing sufficient incentives to developers, a necessary component if it was to work.

The language of the bill was technical and detailed, difficult for those not involved to understand its implications. Over 100 amendments were offered by groups trying to change the bill. This presented challenges for housing advocates. Widespread community sup-

What Is Inclusionary Zoning?

Inclusionary zoning ordinances provide incentives to developers to set aside a percentage of their units for affordable housing. According to a recent report from the Brookings Institution, inclusionary zoning laws exist in more than 130 communities across the nation.