

# Some modest progress in providing affordable housing in R.I. Pro Jo 3/3/88

**A**FFORDABLE housing is a major problem in Rhode Island and the Northeast, as monthly figures issued by government, realtors, builders and others constantly remind us. But as bad as the situation is, there are some encouraging actions being taken that offer hope for the future.

When the governor of Rhode Island announced his 14-point "affordable housing partnership agenda" in the spring of 1987, there were some skeptics who doubted that anything more than lip service might be given to realize these suggested actions. It is good to report that these recommendations are being implemented and, although government works slowly, the problems for one of our most basic needs may be alleviated.

One of the 14 recommendations

was to supply grants to municipalities "to identify specific steps that would be taken to create a better environment for construction and rehabilitation of affordable housing." By the end of the year 12 municipalities had applied for some of the \$200,000 available, and eight were funded at \$25,000 each: Bristol, Cranston, East Providence, Lincoln, Newport, South Kingstown, Warwick and Westerly.

These eight communities — and the four other applicants — are to be congratulated for their recognition of a problem and initiating efforts to resolve it. However, one must ask why 27 of Rhode Island's 39 communities made no effort to address a problem that is common in every part of the state and touches most segments of our society, including welfare recipients, working poor, first-time home buyers and

other middle-income wage earners and the elderly.

These grant communities must have a strategic plan for affordable housing in place by October of this year, at which time they will come together and share their ideas. To further help these grant recipients, a workshop was recently held for them and other communities that attended to hear what some other states in the region are doing to provide for the needs of their people. It should be mentioned that the state-sponsored meeting was funded by the Rhode Island Housing and Mortgage Finance Corp., an example of a new spirit of cooperation now evident.

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The path that both New Jersey and Massachusetts have used with some success involves direct government action. In New Jersey, it is a fair housing stipulation that each community has a responsibility to provide a certain number of affordable units. In Massachusetts, it is Executive Order 215 which allows the state to withhold discretionary funding to local communities and the Comprehensive Permit Process which provides for zoning override at the local level.

It must be emphasized that legislation is not the only route to follow for affordable housing; a variety of other approaches and zon-

ing techniques can also be helpful. These would include tax incentives and relief, alternative forms of ownership and living styles, and acquisition and disposition of building sites, among others. Zoning techniques would include incentives, linkage, clustering and streamlined permitting processes. The options available to a community are almost infinite, if that community is willing to accept the recognized need for affordable housing and makes a commitment to do something about it.

Each of the eight funded communities will have a housing board, hold some public hearings, complete a strategic plan for affordable housing, present it to the local community and, finally, share it with the other communities. The limited funding may only scratch the surface for the large

communities but at least a start has been made, and from these few communities the hope is that innovative approaches may be recommended that will have an impact throughout the state.

Ten years ago the federal department of Housing and Urban Development had 7.4 percent of the federal budget to help provide housing services to the nation. Today that figure is less than one percent. The states have to somehow pick up the pieces of a decimated federal program and provide ideas and money to better house its inhabitants. Rhode Island appears to be moving in the right direction.

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