

From the desk of the Mayor.....

Just recently the New Jersey State Senate passed a bill effectively ending COAH, the Council on Affordable Housing. If this bill was to pass in the State Assembly, Governor Christie would sign it thus effectively ending a very traumatic period in the history of New Jersey. Pushed forward by housing advocates over twenty years ago, COAH had a noble intent but like many governmental initiatives, it became distorted and politicized and soon became a burden to municipal governments and somehow never accomplished its intended goals.

Housing advocates will point to the fact that thousands of affordable housing units were built under COAH, and that is undeniable. But one must factor in the cost of this misguided program. The way the program was structured, it placed totally unrealistic and unattainable requirements on local governments and when those requirements were not met, developers benefited and the character of towns was often permanently altered by forcing high density projects into low density neighborhoods. The courts played a role in this scenario also by reinforcing COAH mandates that were just not doable.

In all fairness, many communities failed to make a reasonable effort to work with COAH and in some cases deserved to be rebuked, however COAH removed one of the best tools it originally provided to municipalities working to create affordable housing; RCA's or Regional Contribution Agreements. RCA's allowed fully developed communities that couldn't find space in which to build new affordable housing units within their borders, the ability to pay other communities to build those units. The end result of RCA's was that many suburban communities that could not find a location to build affordable housing would end up financing affordable housing in urban communities. COAH advocates considered this an extension of the exclusionary zoning rules they were fighting to overcome. RCA advocates felt that RCA's enabled affordable housing to be built in locations where it was needed the most. Both sides of this argument had some validity. But in the end COAH was doomed by its rigidity and its unwillingness to acknowledge the negative impact its methods created for many communities.

There is a desperate need for affordable housing in New Jersey, but rather than mandating communities to reach unattainable goals, incentives should be provided to not only municipalities but to developers. Give builders a reason to build affordable units and they will do so. In this current economy, our State government needs to provide incentives, not punishments or mandates if it wishes to take New Jersey in a new direction.