

Kathleen Koch: New legislation on affordable, fair housing desperately needed in Anne Arundel County

By Kathleen Koch

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Kathleen Koch is the executive director of Arundel Community Development Services. (Capital Gazette)

For most of us, our homes are the center of our lives. Home is where we sleep, where we relax, where we raise a family, where we keep our stuff. Our homes give us an anchor in our busy lives. But for too many Anne Arundel County residents, good local housing is out of reach. I know because I am the director of Arundel Community Development Services, Inc., a nonprofit organization that works in partnership with county government to create affordable housing opportunities and implement homeownership and rental programs.

More than 17,000 county residents are on the Housing Commission's waiting list for housing assistance. A recent analysis by Real Property Research Group indicated that 52 percent of renter households earning \$50,000 or less per year are underserved by the County's existing affordable housing stock. That's more than 9,000 households in Anne Arundel County. Those who do receive housing assistance in the form of a voucher often have difficulty locating available units willing to rent to them, despite having suitable credit and the means to pay. Other forms of housing discrimination – based on race, color, disability status or sexual orientation – continue to limit county residents' access to fair housing. Shockingly, there is no local ordinance barring this type of discrimination in Anne Arundel County, making us an outlier in the Baltimore / Washington region.

Bill 55-19, introduced by County Executive Pittman and co-sponsored by Councilwoman Sarah Lacey along with three other council members, will address this discrepancy head-on by creating a local fair housing law. Adopting this legislation will send a clear message to residents, potential residents and housing professionals that we do not condone or tolerate housing discrimination in Anne Arundel County. The bill will also give residents a clear option to file housing discrimination complaints at the local level, eliminating the need to go to the state or federal governments.

Finally, it will improve upon the federal and state fair housing laws by addressing several other protected classes, including a renter or buyer's source of income. The legislation maintains landlords' ability to set their own rents, rule out potential tenants based on credit or criminal background, and follow typical eviction procedures.

Another bill, 54-19, was introduced by the county executive at the same time, and is cosponsored by Council Chairman Andrew Pruski and three other council members.

his legislation creates opportunities to build affordable housing for workers who need it most – individuals or families just starting out in their careers or older residents on a limited income. Workforce housing is defined as housing that is affordable to households earning 60 to 100 percent of the area median income. For example, for a family of three, the income limits would be \$54,000 or less for rental units and \$90,916 or less for homeownership units.

Who needs this housing? New teachers, police or firefighters just starting their careers and wanting to live in the county they are serving; our aging parents and the health care workers who take care of them; our friends and neighbors with disabilities; workers in the service industries and many more. With the average home sale price more than \$400,000 and rental units in high demand, good housing is simply out of reach for many people working in Anne Arundel County.

The legislation provides incentives to help bring these workforce housing projects to reality, such as reduced water and sewer connection fees and zoning density bonuses. Even with these incentives, these projects are complex to finance and we will be fortunate if we get 60 new units in the next several years. Nevertheless, there are provisions in the bill to make sure these projects can only be developed in appropriate locations.

They must be in areas with appropriate zoning (medium to high-density residential, commercial, industrial or mixed-use zones), be served by public water and sewer, be located on roads designated as a collector or higher and meet school capacity and road tests.

I have been the director of Arundel Community Development Services, Inc. for over 25 years and I can tell you our county needs these reforms. I'm pleased to see Pittman and a majority of the County Council sponsor Bills 54-19 and 55-19. In our quest to make Anne Arundel County "The Best Place," these bills will help make life better for everyone who lives, or wants to live, in our county.