

Richmond Times-Dispatch

Wilder: Plan for public housing

Task force, 'housing czar' among ideas to spur affordable housing

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Mayor L. Douglas Wilder is taking aim at public-housing projects and other pockets of poverty in Richmond and calling for the development of more affordable housing and mixed-use, mixed-income neighborhoods. The mayor announced plans yesterday to hire a "housing czar" and the creation of a task force that will focus on all aspects of neighborhood vitality. The committee will include representatives of many city departments and agencies, some of which deal regularly with crime, with schoolchildren who are ill-equipped to learn and with other societal ills.

"Those issues are not going to be dealt with unless we deconcentrate poverty," Wilder said.

City Councilwoman Ellen F. Robertson, who has introduced several housing proposals similar to the ones announced by Wilder, applauded the mayor's attention to the issue. "Today is a day of celebration and encouragement," she said.

"This is exactly what we need," City Councilman Chris A. Hilbert said.

Wilder said he will be proposing that the city offer incentives to developers to include a certain amount of affordable housing in their plans. He also said the city should set up an affordable-housing fund.

Further, Wilder said his administration will be working with nonprofit, public and private partners to develop a "demonstration project" that could include retail shops, restaurants, mixed-income homes, a park and a school.

No site was announced, but the project could be similar to the redevelopment of Blackwell although not as reliant on federal funding, said Sheila Hill-Christian, executive director of the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority.

"I'm trying to get the city's house in order," Wilder said. "Quite frankly, we have no uniform vision of housing and land use."

Local developer Robin Miller is one of nine members named to Wilder's housing task force. He said developers face zoning obstacles to building mixed-use neighborhoods in the city, and he said he supports the concept of setting aside a portion of his and other development projects for affordable units.

"Bottom line is, a private developer has to be able to make a deal work," he added.

S. Buford Scott, chairman of Scott & Stringfellow brokerage firm, said Wilder's plans should dovetail with efforts he and others have participated in over the past three years that have improved how local housing-development groups, for-profit developers, environmentalists and others work together and communicate.

"I'm delighted to hear what you're telling me," Scott said after learning about the mayor's plan. "All these things are things that have to be done."

Greta J. Harris, senior program director for Virginia LISC, which works to improve the quality of life for low-income residents, said quality affordable housing is as critical to a community's health as jobs, school performance, transportation and the environment.

"One item cannot be addressed completely without the other aspects," she said.

Generally, housing is not considered affordable if it takes more than 30 percent of the gross household income, Harris said.

The new housing czar will be a deputy administrator reporting to Chief Administrative Officer William E. Harrell. He or she will help set and implement housing policies and act as a point person for private and nonprofit developers, as well as the housing authority, Wilder said. An appointment is expected within 30 to 60 days.

Wilder said he wants the task force to define affordability and recommend how much of a particular development must be affordable to qualify for city incentives. Possible enticements include the use of surplus city land and allowing developers to build more homes than would otherwise be allowed, Wilder said.

"Density is what has to be the engine to drive what we're trying to do here," he said.

City Councilwoman Kathy C. Graziano, vice chairwoman of the council's committee on land use, housing and transportation, said in a statement that she looks forward to quick consideration of Wilder's proposals as well as others already introduced. She said she suggested to him earlier this month a policy that would include support for the housing authority, inclusionary zoning policies and the creation of a housing incentive fund.

Richmond needs more affordable housing in part to provide homes for its teachers, police officers and other workers, Robertson said.

"It's important when we build, we build [affordable housing] within, so we'll never find ourselves in the position we're in," she said.

Robertson suggested quick action to create more affordable housing but said careful thought must be given to tearing down or implementing major changes to the public-housing projects.

"We do not want to move from public housing to homelessness."