

ADVOCATES, TENANTS URGE COMMITTEE TO PROTECT SECTION 8 HOUSING

By Colleen Quinn
STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

Housing advocates and tenants urged lawmakers Tuesday to strengthen affordable housing laws to avoid a wave of losses in affordable apartments for low-income residents as federal subsidies dry up.

As many contracts expire under Section 8 – the federal program that reimburses landlords for offering below market rental rates - local officials look to legislators for remedies to preserve existing housing units. A slew of HUD tenants and advocates packed a hearing of the Joint Committee on Housing at the State House Tuesday morning to push for bills that would give communities more control in dealing with landlords who want to convert their affordable housing units.

The Legislature, more than two years ago, attempted to slow down the loss of affordable housing with the Chapter 40T law, which instituted a series of notification requirements for landlords looking to sell or convert their units to market value. Since passage of Chapter 40T, approximately 6,000 units have been preserved, but more than 1,100 units were lost, according to Roger Herzog, executive director of the Community Economic Development Assistance Corporation.

Advocates said while Chapter 40T saved a lot of homes, it did not go far enough for people who are the most susceptible to becoming homeless because of high rental prices. Far too many owners are still converting to rental rates that low-income tenants cannot afford, and advocates said their efforts have been hampered by a lack of legislation on the issue.

They cited the recent conversion of the Burbank Apartment complex in the Fenway neighborhood of Boston. The owners of the 173-unit complex, First Realty Management of Boston, lost federal subsidies last April. Despite protests and objections from the city, the owners pulled out of the low-income housing business, converting the complex which represented almost 10 percent of all subsidized housing in the Fenway area.

Boston is in danger of becoming completely unaffordable for many families who have lived in the city for generations, according to advocates and city officials.

At-Large Boston City Councilor Ayanna Pressley told the committee without passage of a Boston home-rule petition seeking more control, (H 3635) the city will see extreme changes in housing makeup. The bill, sponsored by Rep. Aaron Michlewitz (D-Boston) would allow the city to regulate the rent of “governmental-involved housing” when federal use restrictions expire. The proposal is backed by Mayor Thomas Menino.

“In a city of 600,000 people, certainly not every resident can afford a shiny new loft along the waterfront,” she said. “Without passage of this bill we threaten to become a city of extremes. Boston will not be a city of haves and have nots. Boston will be city of just haves.”

Pressley said the bill made both “moral and economic sense.”

The Housing committee also heard testimony on another local bill to preserve affordable housing.

Residents of a mobile home park in Easton want the Legislature to pass a home-rule bill allowing the town to create a rental board tasked with overseeing rental increases. Easton would join 20 other communities in Massachusetts which have similar boards. The initiative received support from voters at town meeting, according to Tim Kerrigan, a community planner in Easton, who testified in favor of the bill (H 3793).

Residents of the mobile home park said they can no longer afford to stay in their homes because the rent on the land increased 30 percent in one year. People who own a mobile home buy the home, but rent the

land it sits on.

“People who reside there are very poor. I am paying my rent, but it is very hard,” said Brenda Carter, who purchased her home in the Easton mobile home park five years ago. “I have watched my neighbors struggle, watched them put up their belongings for sale on the weekends. I noticed all the For Sale signs that started going up every week, and I worried I would lose my small trailer, which isn’t much, but it is home to me.”

Committee member Rep. Christine Canavan, (D-Brockton) the bill’s sponsor who represents parts of Easton, said it been an ongoing fight for housing security for people who live in the mobile park.

END

1/24/2012