

Redevelopment Plan Endorsed by Board

Tenants in Affordable Units Worried

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Friday, September 12, 2008; B03

Jane Bergwin loves her screened-in porch, where she spends hours sipping coffee and reading the newspaper, soaking in a sylvan vista a few blocks from revitalized downtown Silver Spring.

It's Bergwin's second time as a tenant at the Falklands apartments, and the former lobbyist says it is as affordable and friendly as it was in the 1970s. The New Deal-era complex that once housed Roosevelt administration workers today remains a home for working families, singles and students, with easy access to the Silver Spring Metro, shopping, restaurants and theaters.

But revitalization often brings even more change. Last week, after months of study, the Montgomery County Planning Board made a decision that could upend the world of Bergwin and about 300 other residents of the Falklands' northern section.

Despite objections from preservation groups, an architectural historian and a top county planner, the Planning Board endorsed a plan allowing a developer to tear down the northern section and build upscale apartments, a retail center and some affordable units. The County Council will have the final say this fall.

The debate over the Falklands points to a dilemma faced by local governments across the Washington region. As gas prices rise, urban living becomes more attractive to residents and developers

Properties like the Falklands, for years bastions of moderately priced housing, have become more valuable because of their proximity to Metro and growing suburban downtowns. Landowners are presented with a chance to make more money by converting garden apartments into something more upscale, which can further reduce the dwindling supply of affordable housing.

Planning Board Chairman Royce Hanson said he had considered for some time the tension among historic preservation, affordable housing and new development. He said the Falklands is "a remarkable project" that embodies "the ideals of the New Deal for high-quality affordable housing for workers."

In the end, he said, the best approach is to allow development, including some affordable units, on the northern parcel and to encourage historic preservation of the southern portion across East-West Highway and next to 16th Street.

At the Falklands, a two-bedroom apartment rents for about \$1,450 a month. In Montgomery, the annual median household income is about \$99,000. Housing prices have spiked in recent years, and county data show that residents need to earn at least \$91,000 to be able to buy in the county.

"This is a case where I would much rather make sure of preserving key parts than risk losing all parts . . . and I think there is that risk," Hanson said. "It provides some real opportunities for more affordable housing next to Metro." Three other Planning Board members agreed. Board member Amy Presley was unable to attend Thursday's meeting because of a death in her family.

Had the board declared the entire complex historically significant, the action could have backfired. Although the designation can limit development, the board had no means to ensure that the Falklands would remain affordable much longer. Montgomery County has no rent control rules and has only a handful of legal tools to stem condominium conversion, which often displaces renters.

The Planning Board recommended that the development retain its historic character in the southern portion, but that does not prevent an eventual condominium conversion.

Until recently, the county's regulatory system did little to expand the stock of affordable housing, instead allowing builders to avoid requirements to construct moderately priced housing along with more expensive units. County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) proposed changes in county law to begin to address the loss of affordable housing and hopes to find ways to do more. The County Council will consider the proposals this month.

At the Falklands, if all goes according to plan, the dowdy but serviceable brick buildings that Eleanor Roosevelt helped open in the 1930s will be replaced by about 1,000 apartments in a sleeker high-rise with perhaps 225 affordable units, more than required. That was part of an offer by developer Home Properties to encourage Planning Board approval of a zoning change needed to allow the company to redevelop the site.

Still, some residents say that will change the feel of the place.

"I like the sense of community here, and I don't think you get that in a high-rise," said Josh Folb, a math teacher who lives with his wife and infant son in a Falklands two-bedroom.

Nelson B. Leenhouts, the company's co-chairman, said the proposal to include extra moderately priced units would soften the blow to current tenants. The company is also helping tenants relocate. "We feel a professional sense of responsibility. This is an opportunity to create a trophy project for our company and for Montgomery County," he said.

Home Properties also has offered to rent apartments to Falklands residents at another complex in the White Oak section of Silver Spring.

A housing advocacy group, Action in Montgomery, backed the Falklands redevelopment but encouraged the company to retain affordable units.

Bergwin and other residents said they resented the effort by AIM, which they say has almost no connection to Falklands residents. "Why are they ignoring the people who are already here for people who don't exist yet?" Bergwin asked.

AIM organizer Patty Kaczmariski acknowledged the dilemma.

"We don't like displacing people," she said. "But there was no guarantee the units would remain affordable even if there was no development." With Home Properties' commitment to providing affordable units, she said, the gain eventually could offset the pain.