

Affordable apartments a step closer

Market-rate housing is stalled until law is in place

By Brittany Wallman
South Florida Sun-Sentinel

June 25, 2006

Fort Lauderdale · Downtown may be getting its first "affordable" apartment tower in years, but that would be the only new development for a while.

Commissioners late Tuesday endorsed a 15-story affordable housing tower at 600 N. Andrews Ave. The project needs a final vote July 6.

But earlier in the day, they rejected Mayor Jim Naugle's idea of allowing market-rate development to resume downtown without an affordable housing law in place.

The city can allow another 3,000 apartments or condos to be built in the heart of the city but has said it won't until laws are passed to make sure enough parks are provided for, and that some of the housing is affordable.

The parks impact fee got final approval Tuesday night, enormously increasing the amount residential developers will pay toward parks when they get their building permits. But the affordable housing provision failed earlier this month and is on hold at least until October. The failed law would have required developers to set aside affordable units in their projects or pay fees instead.

Naugle suggested letting developers resume building market-rate housing with no pricing requirements, adding that the city could set aside 15 percent of the 3,000 units for affordable projects, like Flagler Point.

That project is planned by the nonprofit Reliance Housing Foundation and will offer 176 units: 137 apartments for low-income people 55 and older; 30 for workers of any age with low incomes; and nine for-sale market-rate condos for "essential workers" like teachers, nurses and firefighters making between \$48,000 and \$84,000 for a family of four.

The project is the first and only of the many high-rises planned or recently built downtown that is targeted to low-income workers.

Meanwhile, downtown developers have been waiting months for the city to release its virtual moratorium on new market-rate housing, and several members of the Downtown Development Authority were in the audience Tuesday to see if the mayor's proposal would fly.

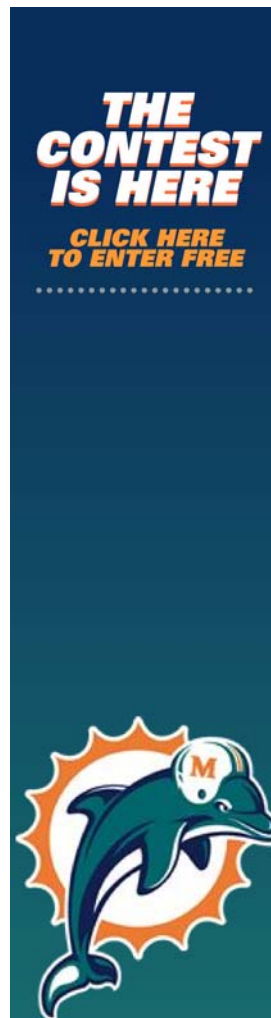
"There are projects now that are ready to go forward and are waiting on these units," Naugle said.

But others disagreed. Commissioner Cindi Hutchinson said commissioners had always agreed they would pass an affordable housing law first.

To not do so now, she said, would amount to a "bait and switch."

Naugle set off a public controversy recently when he said there is no affordable housing crisis and suggested that people just need to work more hours and settle for a condo instead of a house. He led the opposition to the affordable housing proposal, saying it was unfair to put the financial burden on a small group of people: the developers.

Other commissioners also opposed the law but for different reasons. Hutchinson thought it didn't provide enough incentives for developers to help them make up for their costs.



City staff was asked to bring back a newly fashioned law in October. Commissioner Carlton Moore said market-rate housing would just have to wait until then.

Behind him in the audience, Downtown Development Authority Executive Director Chris Wren wondered aloud how the city's quest for lower housing prices could be balanced with its desire to continue growing, "so everyone can get what they want."

Moore snapped back with an answer. "We can't," he said, "and they shouldn't."

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