

Arlington housing advocates press to keep momentum alive

by SCOTT McCAFFREY, Staff Writer | InsideNOVA.com | Posted: Friday, May 27, 2016 7:45 am

Advocates for affordable housing are being urged to keep their eyes on the ball as implementation of the Arlington County government's recently adopted housing master plan moves forward.

Approval of the plan by the County Board last September "sets us up for housing programs over the next 25 years – now it's time to move forward," said David Cristeal, the Arlington government's housing director, during a May 25 forum sponsored by the Alliance for Housing Solutions.

The gathering, held at Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington, brought together about 120 housing advocates to focus on the next steps in retaining the community's stock of affordable properties.

Mary Rouleau (right), the departing executive director of the Alliance for Housing Solutions, said supporters of affordable housing should not underestimate the challenges that await them.

"Look at what is feasible," she encouraged, but also pressed advocates to "think big" and "every once in a while, pull a rabbit out of a hat."

The county government's housing plan aims to maintain about one in six rental units in Arlington priced so they will be affordable to those earning \$65,000 or less (in current dollars) for a family of four. To do so, the county government will have to support efforts to build new units while also slowing the razing and redevelopment of older properties.



Given that localities across Virginia have limited powers to regulate development, the Arlington government will have to be creative to meet its goals, including offering incentives to developers in the form of higher density – a tool that often faces community opposition.

Housing Commission chairman Holly Bray said a wide diversity of viewpoints are being solicited to come up with new thinking on housing issues.

"We need input," Bray told attendees at the forum. "I welcome all of you."

Keeping a segment of the rental stock affordable could be challenging enough, but the county government's goals on new owner-occupied housing may prove even more so. Officials aim to have about 28 percent of new construction priced so it is affordable to households of four that earn \$85,000 to \$130,000 a year in current dollars.

"That's going to be a huge stretch," acknowledged Cristeal, since the average price of all home sales in Arlington is more than \$500,000 and the price of new single-family homes often exceeds \$1 million.

County officials are about to launch an effort to connect with condominium associations, a huge but often overlooked segment of the real estate affordability puzzle. Leaders of condo associations will be surveyed in the spring of 2017 in an effort to find how the county government can assist them.

The May 25 gathering served as a sendoff for Rouleau, who has led the Alliance for Housing Solutions for the past six years. Rouleau, who will be succeeded by Michelle Winters, told advocates that while

she planned to drift off into the sunset, “I will be cheering you on from the sidelines.”

Cristeal said Rouleau had never been shy in pressing the case for affordable housing. “Mary’s given me advice, early and often,” he said with a chuckle. “I’m going to miss that.”

Winters, the incoming executive director, served on the Arlington Housing Commission and has held housing-policy posts with Fannie Mae and its foundation. She currently is president of a community-strategies firm focused on housing and sustainability.

Also joining the Alliance for Housing Solutions are four new board members, who will provide “new skills, commitment and enthusiasm,” said board chair Gene Hubbard.

New board members include Allison Glatfelter, Laura Martin, Koube Ngaaje, and Betis Sorto-Sanchez.