

Regional Perspectives

JOE NATHANSON
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Fairness in Housing

The Community Development Network of Maryland (CDN), a nonprofit advocacy group, won an award in 2014. The Innovation Award, conferred by a group within the National Association of Counties, recognized CDN in connection with the group's "Consider the Person" campaign. This campaign recognizes that people who receive Housing Choice Vouchers (which used to be known as Section 8 vouchers) were being prevented from accessing housing units that were on the market for rent. The reason: the fact that the prospective tenants would be paying a portion of their rent with these vouchers,

Using terms associated with more violent campaigns, CDN and the Consider the Person effort have been about "changing the hearts and minds" of landlords when considering applicants for their available rental units. As the CDN website explains, "All too often, language used to describe voucher holders is comprised of stereotypes, misconceptions and racism. The *Consider the Person* campaign was created specifically to address those perceptions head-on, and to promote fair and affordable housing opportunities in the Baltimore region."

The campaign has conveyed this message in the form of a series of compelling videos that explain the circumstances leading to a particular individual's qualification for and desire to use the voucher which is supported by funding through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. One of the videos presents a landlord's positive experience in accepting voucher holders as tenants.

Apparently, the majority of members of the Baltimore County Council did not get the message.

I say this in light of the recent 6-1 vote to defeat legislation that would have required Baltimore County landlords not to discriminate against potential renters on the basis of their source of rental payment.

The council had taken up the legislation in order to be in compliance with a conciliation agreement between the county and HUD signed in 2011, as the outgrowth of complaints by several individuals and two housing advocacy organizations of discriminatory practices by county landlords.

The county legislation called for in the conciliation agreement requires that "when considering an individual's rental application, the landlord must consider government benefits like social security, veterans benefits, disability payments and Section 8 vouchers as income." The legislation would place Baltimore

County in conformity with the practices already in place in Howard, Frederick and Montgomery counties.

This failure to take meaningful steps to expand opportunities for housing in Baltimore County is part of a long history. The county's extensive record of exclusionary housing practices goes back over several decades. This unhappy record includes such events as:

- The decision to reject a proposal by nonprofit developer Homes for America which had secured state funding to build 50 affordable units in the Rosedale section of the county. In that instance the county council voted to reject the \$1-million subsidy the state was offering. The local county council member, responding to the fears of her constituents that the new housing would concentrate too many poor people in on the east side of the county, won over her council colleagues on this matter.
- The uproar over the Moving to Opportunity program in 1994, when fears that thousands of Baltimore County public housing residents would overrun neighborhoods in Dundalk, Essex and Middle River. This experimental HUD program would have made available no more than 40 vouchers per year to be used at scattered locations in the county.
- The rebuffs in the mid-1970s, by both the county council and the county delegation to the General Assembly, to secure federal funds for housing sought by County Executive Ted Venetoulis, compounded by the failure to even have a county housing agency until 1987,
- The outspoken resistance, in the days of County Executive Dale Anderson (in office 1966 to 1974), to having anything to do with government subsidized housing, anything that hinted at public housing.

What the next chapter in this story will be is not clear. Rich Hall, the executive director of Citizens Planning and Housing Association, suggests that the council could take another look at the legislation, incorporating language to which they can claim ownership. But, under the strange provisions of the conciliation agreement, the county council does not have to take up this issue again until its next term in office, sometime in 2019. Until then, the county will apparently receive its full annual allotment of HUD funding, despite its failure to meet its commitment, on paper, to the furtherance of fair housing.

[Disclosure: Working at the Baltimore Metropolitan Council, in 1996 and 2002, I helped to prepare of the regional Analysis of Impediments to Furthering Fair Housing, to which Baltimore County was a party.]

Joe Nathanson heads Urban Information Associates, Inc., a Baltimore-based economic and community development consulting firm. He writes a monthly column for *The Daily Record* and can be contacted at urbaninfo@comcast.net.