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In Case You Missed It: Local Government Favors Christie's Proposed COAH Plans

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PASSAIC VALLEY - Area officials are satisfied with Gov. Chris Christie's plan to abolish the Council on Affordable Housing (COAH) and replace it with a more locally controlled plan to provide low income housing.

"I'm kind of glad that it's finally being addressed and that the end-goal of providing affordable housing will be maintained," said Woodland Park Mayor Pat Lepore. He said the plan in place had "morphed into something that was an administrative nightmare."

Lepore said the old system of providing affordable housing went beyond its original intent.

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"Instead of encouraging economic growth, you're throwing another obstruction in front of the way people want to invest in your municipality," he said.

Borough planner Kathryn Gregory said that Woodland Park filed their third round of plans at the end of 2008. COAH deemed the borough's application complete, she said, but has not given them their needed certification.

"We've been waiting a year and a half for our substantive certification," Gregory said. The delay is not uncommon. Gregory said she has also filed applications for Edgewater, Saddle Brook and Lyndhurst, all of which have yet to be certified.

Little Falls township planner Michael Kauker said that he filed the township's COAH certification on Dec. 31, 2008, but the process has been delayed because Edward Schumacher, a local developer, objected to the application. However, he said, Christie's proposed changes are a "positive direction."

"I would call it a breath of fresh air and a more straightforward way of dealing with the challenges of low and moderate income housing," Kauker said. "It is beneficial for municipalities to have a better level of control over their land use."

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He also said Christie's proposal emphasizes rehabilitating existing homes.

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Christie said in a news release that the new plan "will help to fix a broken system by promoting sensible, predictable and achievable planning to implement change." According to the release, the plan calls for the following:

New Jersey will abolish affordable housing quotas. The Department of Community Affairs (DCA) will file municipally approved housing plans and make them publicly available. The DCA will continue to administer the state Affordable Housing Trust Fund. And if a plan is challenged, the DCA will review municipality's plan to determine if it is "factually accurate and consistent with law."

The state will repeal the Fair Housing Act and abolish COAH six months after the proposed legislation passes, according to the release.

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Totowa Mayor John Coiro said his borough last filed for their substantive certification in 2004 and that such certification is good through the end of 2010. What happens after that remains to be determined pending the passage of Christie's bill.

"I think we're all watching and waiting," Coiro said. He called the elimination of the gross share obligation, "a favorable development," adding that, "I think towns should be allowed to develop their properties as they deem fit for their municipality."

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