

I realize that CR-54 and other changes separating the Housing Commission from county government are almost inevitable. I testified against the bill to sever the Housing Commission completely from county government. Now, however, I would like to remind the Council that their recent action requires more than just establishing administrative policies for the Housing Commission.

I was moved to do this after hearing County Executive Kittleman speak at last week's meeting of the Oakland Mills Village Board, where he introduced the consultants who will be doing the feasibility study for the revitalization of Oakland Mills. The new plan for our village center includes not only the retail strip but also the surrounding apartments.

During the question period, I commented that we were fortunate that the County owned a large section (the 17-acre Verona complex) of the area included in the study. The County Executive interrupted me to explain that the Verona Apartments actually belong to the Housing Commission, not the county. Was he preparing to deny responsibility in some future scenario where the Commission decides to redevelop the Verona in a way that increases the already high concentration of poverty in our village? When the head of the Housing Commission is no longer the head of the County Housing Department, he will not be answerable to the County Executive. Likewise, should the feasibility study develop a scenario for revitalization that suggests the use of those apartments in some innovative way, was the County Executive preparing us for the fact that he would be powerless in helping to make it happen?

This change that you are making won't alter that reality. Nevertheless, it brings home to me one of the key recommendations of our Village Center Plan: to advocate for a comprehensive housing policy for the entire county. The policy should set guidelines and parameters within which the Housing Commission must operate. Mr. Kittleman's own transition team made such a policy its number one recommendation. It pains me to report that so far nothing has been done to accomplish this.

We in Oakland Mills know all too well what happens when decisions about affordable housing are made on a piecemeal basis. Concentrating poverty in a few neighborhoods has placed a huge burden on a handful of schools. This in turn leads new homebuyers away from these neighborhoods. In Montgomery County this has resulted in what amounts to de facto segregation at the eastern end of the county. Are we immune to similar unintended consequences here in Howard County?

If the Executive branch lacks the political will to write a Comprehensive Housing Policy, then it's incumbent on the County Council to take the lead. The Housing Commission must have a framework that guides future purchases and redevelopment of its extensive holdings of apartment complexes in Columbia. CR-54 is fine as far as it goes, but it does nothing to address the big picture. Howard County can and should provide enough affordable housing for all residents; however, lack of a countywide housing policy could spell disaster for the entire county.