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Strong community support for inclusive housing plan in Columbia during Howard County Council hearing

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Theresa Ballinger, an advocate representing the Howard County Autism Society, urged the Howard County Council on Monday to approve a planned housing project that she said would position Columbia as an innovative leader and set a groundbreaking example to support people living with disabilities.

“We’re asking you to help lead a movement because nothing less than a movement is needed to create real change,” Ballinger said. “Lead the way, council members, lead the way.”



Patuxent Commons development rendering. (Moseley Architects)

More than 20 people gave testimony similar to Ballinger’s at the council meeting, asking for approval of a special financial agreement and a growth ordinance waiver that would allow the [Patuxent Commons project](#) to proceed.

The project’s plans call for a 76-unit affordable apartment complex on a wooded lot at the northeast corner of Cedar Lane and Freetown Road in Columbia. Of those 76 units, 19 would be set aside for people with disabilities.

A vote on the project is expected during an April 4 council meeting. If approved, Mission First Housing Group plans to begin construction in early 2023 and be open for residents in 2024. The developer is working with the Howard County Autism Society to create the complex.

“There is a huge need in Howard County for housing for adults with disabilities that is affordable and truly integrated into the larger community,” said Elizabeth Everhart, senior director for Mission First Housing Group. “The testimony by self-advocates and families was extremely powerful. We hope the council finds it compelling and will support the project moving forward.”

Debbie Clutts, a Howard County resident of 32 years, praised the project’s vision and location, which is adjacent to the Hickory Ridge Village Center.

“It’s close to shopping, it has transportation access, which is important because many of people with disabilities and seniors don’t drive, and it’s also close to job opportunities and community activity near downtown Columbia and the lakefront,” Clutts said.

The developer is seeking the approval of a Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) agreement. According to the Office of the Howard County Auditor, PILOT agreements are a mechanism used by local governments and developers to allow projects to be approved when they otherwise may not be able to be because of costs. The agreements provide the developer with financial relief in the form of waived local property taxes for a specified period. Developers are usually required to pay a minimum PILOT amount along with state taxes and any local taxes not waived.

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Kim Mosheno

Autism Society of America

If approved, the agreement would qualify the project for a special affordable housing exemption from the county's Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance. The APFO is an ordinance designed to direct growth to areas where adequate infrastructure, such as roads and schools, exists or will exist. The APFO waiver is critical to allow the project to develop at the chosen location, according to Mark Dunham, a longtime consultant for the Howard County Autism Society.

During Monday's legislative hearing, testimony from county residents, disability advocates, local housing developers and elected leaders was in unanimous support of the project's approval.

Everhart expressed how the PILOT agreement is necessary to financing the project because many future residents with disabilities will have limited ability to pay rent.

"PILOTS are a common financing tool used in affordable housing to lower longtime operating expenses, [and] without the lower expenses it's almost impossible to charge the lower rent that our disabled residents need," Everhart explained.

Matthew Plantz, of Columbia, an Autism Society board member and disability self-advocate, gave emotional testimony on the positive ramifications of the project, saying it would provide housing for many residents with disabilities.

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Christiana Rigby
Howard County Council
District A

"Giving Patuxent Commons what's required and requested would help people stay in the county that they grew up in," Plantz said. "You would have the chance to be the first in the country to do this historic thing. Please support Patuxent Commons; I just believe it would make Columbia better."

Raya Armaly, a resident who lives a half-mile from the site, testified about how the development would affect her paralyzed 33-year-old son.

"The Patuxent Commons community would be the ideal stepping-stone for his path to independence," Armaly said. "He would live in a community where others have been self-selected to embrace the idea of supporting their members."

Kim Mosheno, vice president of public policy for the Autism Society of America, commended the work of the Howard County Autism Society and called the Patuxent Commons initiative "bigger" than Howard County.

"Affiliates throughout our network are wrestling with the same housing challenges that Howard County is facing ... and we're looking to Howard County to produce an example of what an inclusive affordable housing project can be," Mosheno said.

Dunham called the project "terrific and much-needed in Columbia."

"I don't think there's any question on the part of the council members that this kind of housing is needed and necessary and that we have a really good way of providing a solution to the housing crisis facing people with disabilities," he said.

Council member Christiana Rigby, a Democrat representing Columbia in District 3, said testimony from the community gave her a sense of pride in her hometown.

"I think that this particular project could not be more in line with the vision of Columbia," Rigby said. "This is really an example of us coming into our own in a lot of ways. [Patuxent Commons] represents the best kind of investment that we could make in our community. It's innovative, it's inclusive and it's led by the community."