

Growth in downtown Columbia could spur an increase in affordable housing

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Columbia -

The redevelopment of downtown Columbia could bring an influx of affordable housing, but the details have not been worked out.

“Historically, the primary route to getting affordable housing is through rental units,” said Sherman Howell, a member of the African-American Coalition of Howard County and the county’s housing task force.

Ninety percent of the planned 5,500 residential units are apartments, creating a high-density urban design, said Jeffrey Bronow, chief of research for the Howard County Department of Planning and Zoning.

Apartments are usually the most viable living option for people who earn less than \$35,000 a year, Howell said. Most of the apartments are expected to rent for about \$1,500 a month based on a survey of Columbia and Ellicott City apartments, according to a recent fiscal analysis of the plan for downtown Columbia.

However, 15 percent of the total residential units will be set aside for affordable housing. Apartments will cost an average of \$1,196 per unit and condominiums an average of \$1,336. Families making up to \$70,880 qualify for affordable housing.

The county Department of Planning and Zoning will continue to explore ways to regulate the costs of the residential units planned for downtown Columbia, said Mina Hilsenrath, chief of environmental and community planning for Howard County.

Strategies may include:

- » Requiring developers to moderately price a percentage of their units
- » Having the government subsidize payments
- » Taking donations from nonprofits to offset costs.

The department has until January to present a final proposal to the County Council. Howard County officials continue to work on options for affordable housing.

A special task force is expected to present recommendations to solve affordable housing problems by the end of the month.

Recent measures to boost affordability, such as a bill that would allow the county’s Housing Commission to partner with private investors, have met resistance because of zoning and density concerns.

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