

Affordable housing within reach

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Letters to the Editor
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The Sun-Times editorial "Incentives create affordable housing" [July 29] makes a great case for why Chicago needs affordable housing to keep its neighborhoods diverse, safe and livable. We could not agree more that decent, affordable housing is a key ingredient for individual and family success.

We all know that Chicago is a developer's town--a fact that is unlikely to change even as the city reforms its aged zoning code. Contrary to what Mayor Daley and his colleagues on the zoning commission say, the zoning code is an ideal venue through which to address Chicago's affordable housing crisis.

According to its mission statement, the code is intended to "promote and to protect the public health, safety, morals, comfort, convenience and the general welfare of the people."

The city regularly provides developers with "incentives" through zoning--last year the City Council approved over 600 zoning changes--and it could easily take the step of linking zoning bonuses for developers with a mandatory affordable housing set-aside requirement. Using both a carrot and a stick to boost production of affordable housing is a proven approach, one that many developers support when it's accompanied by reduced city fees, a less cumbersome permit processes, and density bonuses.

In Boston, where Mayor Thomas Menino established this policy to protect the city's neighborhoods, development remains as strong as ever with thousands of units in the pipeline. Last year, the zoning law generated 125 new affordable units, and millions of dollars for low-income housing. Mayors around the country are taking steps to emulate Boston's success. Next week, Denver's Mayor Wellington Webb is championing similar legislation in his City Council.

Making Chicago a city for all is really a question of political will. We can do better. Where there's a will, there's a way.

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