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City OKs mayor's affordable housing plan

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The second time was the charm for Mayor Daley's plan to use enhanced developer incentives to solve Chicago's affordable housing crisis: It sailed through the City Council Monday, one week before nine new aldermen bankrolled by organized labor are sworn in.

The mayor's ordinance would broaden the city's 10 percent affordable housing mandate to include all types of city land transactions, planned developments and zoning changes that increase density.

Units would have to be affordable to families that earn no more than \$75,000, the annual median income for a family of four in the Chicago metropolitan area. That's roughly \$183,000 for a two-bedroom home.

Developers would be free to opt out of the requirement, only if they contribute \$100,000-per-unit to the city's affordable housing trust fund.

Last week, seven aldermen who wanted to push the envelope even further used a parliamentary maneuver to postpone consideration of the mayor's ordinance until the new City Council is seated.

Daley countered by calling a special meeting to ram through the ordinance before the May 21 inauguration.

Today, the mayor got his way by a vote of 44 to 2, but not before a pair of closer votes -- with 11 and 12 dissenting votes respectively -- that would have reduced the income ceiling.

Ald. Toni Preckwinkle (4th) wanted to make it \$60,000 or 80 percent of the area median. Ald. Billy Ocasio (26th) would have lowered the bar even further -- to \$49,848-a-year for a family of four.

Ocasio noted that Daley has essentially been dragged along on the issue of affordable housing. The original ordinance took five years to pass. The amendment approved today took another five years to bring to the floor.

"People have told me, 'Go ahead and pass this. Then, you could come back and amend it'...Have faith? What kind of faith do you want me to have when we introduce something and it takes five years," said Ocasio, who cast one of the two "no" votes.

Ald. Walter Burnett (27th), who grew up in Cabrini Green, lobbied for the lower income ceiling, wondering aloud, "Who are we trying to help?...If I die right now, I will feel good knowing that I stood up for people and I did something for my lord Jesus Christ in trying to help his people."

But, when both amendments were defeated, Burnett climbed aboard the mayor's bandwagon.

"This is movement. This is progress...This should be celebrated as a victory...I agree with people in the audience that we need to do better. I disagree...to the extent that they say, 'Vote no and do nothing,' " said Ald. Fredrenna Lyle (6th).

When the special meeting was over, Daley said his administration would "continue to be creative and use all the tools at our disposal to create even more affordable housing." Without revealing specifics, the mayor said he would soon unveil "our new plan to preserve more of our housing stock."

But, Daley warned that the housing market in Chicago and across the nation is slowing -- with a 20 percent drop over this time last year in existing home sales here.

"We must be careful that new actions don't slow it down even further....I'm concerned that if we mandate

broader set-asides now, as some want, the housing market will slow down even more," he said.

Daley denied that he rushed the ordinance through amid concern that a more independent Council may go too far. He also played down what could be the foundation for an independent bloc.

Then, why the need for a special City Council meeting?

"Why not? Just get it done," the mayor said.

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