

Housing, schmousing

by Mick Dumke on September 20, 8:54 pm

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Four months ago a group of aldermen [fought Mayor Daley](#) over how ambitious the city should be in spurring construction of affordable housing. The debate was more impassioned than typical policy discussions in City Council. In other words, there was a debate. But this one came far closer to getting personal than usual, with aldermen who typically yield to the mayor suggesting he was too cozy with developers and realtors to be willing to craft effective housing legislation. Then all but one of them [voted to pass](#) Daley's measure.

It's fair to say that the level of interest was a little lower when the council's 14-member housing committee met this week to hear an update on the city's affordable housing record. One alderman--committee chairman [Ray Suarez](#)--was around for all of the 15-minute report, and for most of it he was the only member of the council present. Three others--Lona Lane (18th), Sharon Denise Dixon (24th), and Ariel Reboyras (30th)--each showed up for a few minutes apiece.

Suarez, briefly accompanied by Reboyras, set the tone for the meeting shortly after he'd gavelled it to order. Introducing Ellen Sahli, the Department of Housing's acting commissioner, Suarez said, "We are looking forward to listening to what a great job she's doing, and what a great job the city's doing on behalf of housing."

The alderman paused a moment to address classes from Columbia and Harold Washington colleges that were sitting in the audience. "Welcome to seeing government in action," he said.

Suarez told them that the city was in the middle of a five-year, \$1.5 billion affordable housing plan. "We have a policy here, and the policy here is that we listen to the report, and we ask questions, and we're very respectful of each other, and it's worked very well."

Sahli said the city "committed" more than \$67 million to help preserve or build 4,200 affordable units in the first half of the year, putting it in position to meet its 2007 targets of \$300 million and 7,930 units. She went into detail with several projects in the works, noting that the apartments created would rent for between \$721 and \$1,000 a month while condos would be kept affordable for families of four making \$75,400 (which, by the city's calculations, means they'd list around \$183,000). Houses and two-flats would sell for \$195,000 to \$265,000.

In May, council critics deemed these prices, and the income levels of the families targeted, too high for working families in Chicago, where the median household income is about \$41,015. This time, Suarez was the sole alderman in the room when she finished.

Naturally, no one had any questions, since no one was there to ask them. So Suarez offered his analysis of the report. "This is, I believe, a very motivating report, because it shows that the city of Chicago is working. It shows that we have an interest in people," he said. "The problem is that more can be done--we can always do more. But there is not a free ride. When we do more, we have to be able to get different levels of funding to make this a reality. But for those of you here for the first time, there isn't a city in the country doing more for affordable housing. Community advocates want us to do more, and we'd like to. But the only way to do more is with money, and we're stretched thin."

Kevin Jackson, executive director of the [Chicago Rehab Network](#), offered a critical voice, testifying that many of the city's projects were well-intended but still too costly for thousands of working-class and low-income families. Additionally troubling to Jackson was the fact that only a fraction of the rental apartments created by city programs were open to any low-income family in the city--the rest are being built as part of public housing redevelopment projects. The city simply needs to devote more money to affordable rental housing, Jackson said, or leave more families at risk of housing crises. "CRN must reiterate its call for the city to replace resources that are allocated to the CHA plan from [Department of Housing] funds in order to meet pressing housing needs for all Chicagoans."

The other three aldermen had walked in during Jackson's presentation, and Dixon asked Sahli for clarification about the paperwork for a project in her west-side ward. Then Suarez wished good luck to a housing department staffer who was leaving for a new job: "Best of luck to you, God bless you, and aldermen Dixon, Lane, and Rebroyas move that we adjourn."