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IN THE REGION | WESTCHESTER

The Affordability Problem

By ELSA BRENNER

IN [New Rochelle](#) and Mount Vernon this fall, ribbon-cutting ceremonies held to mark the opening of new affordable housing drew elected officials who hailed their own efforts to get such units built, despite the high cost of land in Westchester and public resistance in many communities. So far this year, 95 new units of below-market-rate housing have become available, and 487 are under construction.

In New Rochelle, where 25 new single-family town houses have been completed, [Andrew J. Spano](#), the county executive, said he was “proud that Westchester County helped make this happen.” County Legislator Vito Pinto, whose district includes parts of New Rochelle, used the word “delighted” to express his feelings.

Similarly, Mount Vernon officials hailed construction of 16 affordable two-family homes, a project to which the county also contributed money.

Mr. Spano attended that ceremony, too, along with County Legislator Clinton Young, who recently won the Democratic nomination in the race for mayor of Mount Vernon, and [Ernest D. Davis](#), the incumbent, who lost the primary to Mr. Young but will run in the general election on the Independence and Conservative lines. All three men expressed jubilation about the new project there.

But critics say they see self-congratulation as misplaced, given that the county has built only about half the affordable housing it determined was needed in the early 1990s.

In mid-July a federal judge, apparently persuaded by the critics’ arguments, refused to dismiss a lawsuit filed early in the year in which the Anti-Discrimination Center of Metro New York Inc., a civil rights group, claims that the failure to build affordable housing effectively keeps Westchester’s municipalities racially segregated.

Michael Allen, a lawyer with the Washington firm of Relman & Dane, which is representing the center, said that building affordable housing in places like Mount Vernon and New Rochelle, which already have high concentrations of minorities, perpetuates segregation. “A real test of political will,” he said last week, “would involve the county challenging the other municipalities to do their share.”

Matthew T. Miklave, the lawyer representing the county, described the suit as “without merit,” asserting that the county cannot force a locality to build below-market-rate housing.

But the suit also accuses Westchester of having made false claims to the federal government when it applied for and received \$45 million in federal money for the years 2000 to 2005. Craig Gurian, executive director of the center and an adjunct professor at [Fordham University](#) School of Law, says the suit seeks to force the county to repay the federal government triple the amount it received — or \$135 million.

George M. Raymond is chairman of the Westchester County Housing Opportunity Commission, a 15-member panel established by the County Legislature in 1994 for the purpose of enlisting local support for affordable housing. Its initial goal was 5,000 new affordable units by 2000; of those, 2,309 were built by that time.

“Yes,” he said of the new projects this fall, “we’re grateful for every new unit. But then we also have to ask, ‘Where’s the rest?’”

The commission’s tenure has been extended to 2009 to carry out a plan to create 10,768 units — the number, based on the 2000 census, was determined in a 2004 housing study by the Center for Urban Policy Research at [Rutgers University](#).

On the basis of that report, the commission updated its allocations, using 2015 as the new deadline. Of the 10,768 units needed, only 970 had been built as of July 2005, the most recent time the commission tabulated its figures.

In New Rochelle, for example, 200 of the 481 new units of affordable housing the commission recommends are built or under way. Mount Vernon’s allocation was 249; as of July 2005, it had 134 units completed or under construction, and it recently completed 32 more.

“Even those cities that have made substantial gains, such as Mount Vernon and New Rochelle, still have a long way to go,” Mr. Raymond said

While officials in many communities point out that they have another eight years to meet the allocation goals, Mr. Raymond said, “I tell them the need is now and growing every year, and they should not sit around waiting.”

During the 1990s, several municipalities met or exceeded their share of affordable housing as recommended by the commission: Yonkers, which was under a federal court order to desegregate its housing and schools; Mount Vernon; Peekskill; the village of Mamaroneck; Elmsford; and Tarrytown.

For example, Mamaroneck village’s allocation was 86; it built 197, and as a result, it was given a credit of 111 units, reducing to 33 its target for new units by 2015. Since 2000, the village has completed or is constructing 10.

By contrast, Harrison had an allocation of 307 for 2000 and has a new allocation of 756 for 2015. It has not built anything.

Mr. Raymond recalled that in the early 1990s when the county wanted to build an affordable project in Harrison, the Town Board at first approved it. “But then there was an election and the whole board was thrown out,” he said.

According to Richard Hyman, a consultant to the commission and a member of Port Chester Residents for Affordable Housing, a grass roots group, the attitude of village administrators changed after elections in 2000, when a new slate of officials proved sympathetic to the effort to build affordable housing. The village, Mr. Hyman said, has approved a 35-unit project, although construction has not yet begun.

Among those that have not yet built any affordable housing are Bronxville, Larchmont, Pelham and Scarsdale.

Mr. Raymond pointed out that the need for affordable housing continues to grow in Westchester as it becomes scarcer in [New York City](#). The situation will only worsen, he added, now that rent restrictions are starting to expire on about 4,000 30- and 40-year-old Mitchell-Lama and Section 8 apartments regionwide.

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