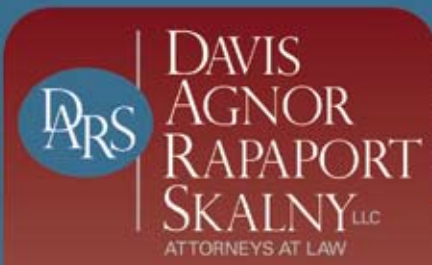


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LEGAL BRIEFS

Senior Housing Issues Addressed

By now, everyone knows about the aging of Howard County. Over the past several years, the tidal wave of aging Baby Boomers has been highlighted to urge reforms to Social Security, Medicare and a host of other governmental programs. In Howard County, the most significant concern voiced so far has been about housing.

A quick review of the numbers – of the almost 270,000 persons in Howard County right now, only 24,000 are over age 65. However, in 2020, when our total population is projected to reach almost 320,000, our population over age 65 will be almost 50,000. Add in the age group from 55-64, and that number rises to about 90,000. These are startling numbers from a planning perspective. Indeed, by 2020, there will be more people over the age of 65 than we have children in our school system.

As a group, our senior population is one that we want to retain in abundant numbers in our community. Seniors add so much to our vibrant community, such as volunteers for our non-profit organizations, support for our families, tax revenues to operate other governmental programs, and labor for our businesses. As people retire, we want them to stay in Howard County rather than move to a state where they can receive better accommodations or benefits. One such accommodation is attractive, affordable and appropriate housing for our seniors.

Senior housing will need to incorporate elements of universal design - conveniences that will allow a person to age successfully in their home. Wider halls will be needed to accommodate walkers, motorized carts or wheel chairs. Steps need to be eliminated, and switches, handles and knobs must be reachable. Bathrooms must be made safer and accessible. In other words, both new homes and rehabilitated homes must be livable or “visitable” by everyone, no matter what their physical limitations.

In order to insure that adequate housing will be available for seniors, we must take steps now. Land is a scarce resource that must be used wisely. It also takes many years to develop, especially in light of other concerns about maintaining adequate facilities for any new construction. New construction, however, will only be able to provide a part of our answer. Our existing housing stock will also have to be rehabilitated to help meet the growing needs for such housing.

Recently, representatives from government, business, and the community met to design a Senior Housing Master Plan for Howard County. For the past year, this group has reviewed the changing demographics of Howard County, the current resources that are available for future senior housing options, and sound planning techniques for providing such housing. The result is that now we have a common base of understanding about the needs and the options associated with meeting the needs for senior housing. In other words, we have a plan!

Over the next few months, recommendations that came out of the Senior Housing Master Plan will be submitted to Howard County’s Planning Board and Zoning Board for inclusion into the County’s Comprehensive Rezoning process. In addition, some of the concepts from the Plan may be incorporated into other governmental initiatives, such as building codes or affordable housing.

Now, we have a sense of where we are going and why we are going there. And that, as is said, is a very good thing.