Proposed ordinance will set aside some new housing for low-income families

by Amy Waddle and Jen Hoelzle
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A contentious low-income housing issue is back on the agenda at City Hall, but this time there are whispers of compromise in the council chambers.

On Wednesday, the City Council Committee on Housing and Real state will hear testimony from Ald. Toni Preckwinkle (4th) and supporters of a proposed housing ordinance that would require 15 percent of all new developments be set aside for low-income families.

This ordinance is a revision of Preckwinkle's December 2002 proposal that failed in lieu of Mayor Richard M. Daley's own affordable housing legislation.

Council members backed the mayor's ordinance, which reserves affordable housing in 20 percent of city-financed and 10 percent of city-subsidized developments, over Preckwinkle's original proposal, a more aggressive 25 percent set-aside requirement on all city construction.

According to Preckwinkle, the city's current ordinance does not go far enough.

"[The mayor's ordinance] applies only to the sale of city-owned land and to tax increment financing districts," she said. "[My] ordinance applies more broadly to every development, including condo conversions or renovations or properties that are 10 units or more."

Although her revised and less aggressive ordinance has earned support as a more reasonable way to provide affordable housing, Preckwinkle said she still faces opposition from the mayor's office.

"The mayor has a big 'not invented here' complex," she said. "This isn't their idea, therefore they're disinclined to enforce it. They're not exactly innovators when it comes to housing."

Nicholas Brunick of Business and Professional People for the Public Interest said that although the mayor's ordinance has been positive, it falls short of what could be done under Preckwinkle's proposal.

The mayor's ordinance has created 438 units since its passage in April 2003, according to Molly Sullivan, spokeswoman for the city's housing department.

The department will listen to debate on "a very complex issue," Sullivan said.

"The mayor's ordinance is a great ordinance," Brunick said. "We can be getting many more affordable housing developments each year if we would extend that ordinance to all developments."

Both Brunick and Kevin Jackson, executive director of the Chicago Rehab Network, estimate an immediate need of 77,000 units for Chicagoans making less than $20,000 per year. A study by Brunick's organization projected that 7,338 units would have been developed from 1998-2003 if Preckwinkle's 15 percent set-aside proposal was in place.

Even though Preckwinkle and advocates such as Brunick and Jackson hoped for higher percentages of set-asides, they realize that further compromise may be necessary to make the proposal a reality.

"I'd be stupid not to [compromise], don't you think?" Preckwinkle said. "If we can get anything, we're better off than we are now."

Preckwinkle's willingness to negotiate may draw in opposing real estate agents and developers.

Jennifer Maley, spokeswoman for the Chicago Association of Realtors, said the group would not support Preckwinkle's ordinance as it stands. However, Maley expressed a willingness to work with affordable housing advocates to create a workable solution.

"We'll work to promote the opportunity for all to realize their dream of home ownership," she said.

Preckwinkle will enter Wednesday's meeting with the supporting signatures of 23 aldermen, just shy of the 26 needed for passage. But that doesn't mean the support isn't there. Preckwinkle has caught the attention--and may catch the vote--of aldermen who have not signed on.

Ald. Ariel Reboyras (30th), a member of the housing committee, said he does not put his signature on anything, but is listening closely to this discussion.

"It's going to be a learning process on this matter," he said. "I don't know where we differ, but it seems like everyone has some interesting points here."

Amy Waddle and Jen Hoelzle are reporters for the Medill News Service.