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County initiates pilot affordable rental program
Developer incentives foundation of ordinance

[By Ron MacArthur](#)

Modeled after its moderately priced housing program, Sussex County now has a three-year pilot program to establish an affordable rental-housing program. County council unanimously voted Tuesday, Dec. 9 to establish the program.

"Rents are beyond the reach of many low-income families in Sussex County," said William Lecates, director of Sussex County Community Development and Housing, repeating what he has said during several other appearances before council.

Rentals in the Cape Region can exceed \$1,000 a month for two-bedroom units. The average rent in the county is \$665 per month.

The program will offer incentives to developers who include affordable rental units within 30 percent to 80 percent of area median income, which is \$55,000. Brandy Bennett, county housing coordinator, said for a family of four that would equal monthly rents ranging from \$400 to \$900 for a three-bedroom rental unit.

Lecates said home ownership has become impossible for many people, and renting has become the only alternative.

"But even affordable rentals elude many people in the marketplace," he said. "A major problem we have in Sussex County is that while rental prices have increased, the average wages have not kept pace, and often they have remained low or stagnant, particularly in the service industry," he said. "This program is aimed at helping that segment of the population."

During a Dec. 9 public hearing, several housing advocates supported the program. **Sandy Spence of Lewes, representing the Sussex Housing Group and Delaware Housing Coalition,** said although more than 75 percent of county residents own their own homes, more than 1,000 renters pay more than 30 percent of their household income for rent.

Housing and financial experts agree that paying 30 percent or less of household income for housing costs is the affordable threshold.

Under the program, incentives for developers include expedited review and a 20-percent density bonus for rental units on land near town centers and within development districts. The program would not be available in rural areas, and units would have to remain in the program for at least 30 years.

The expedited review reduces review delays by several months. Instead of taking more than a year to go through the zoning approval process, projects in the affordable rental program could be reviewed within three to five months once an application is filed.

The density bonus incentive could apply only to the rental portion of the project in a mixed-use community. The maximum density would be 12 units per acre.

Qualified renters would have to meet income guidelines, be United States citizens, have a clean criminal record and live and work in Sussex County for at least one year prior to submitting an application.

A copy of the ordinance can be found under the ordinances section of the county's website at www.sussexcountyde.gov