



Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry

A voice for justice, equality and compassion in New Jersey

Speaking out for Affordable Housing

Position: The Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry of New Jersey, representing members of Unitarian Universalist communities in New Jersey, supports the development of affordable housing wherein at least 20% of the housing stock in all municipalities fits the budgets of lower-income persons.

Background

Advocates for affordable housing in this State again await decisions by the State Supreme Court on required rules and practices for municipalities' obligations in providing housing for persons with low and moderate incomes. The State Supreme Court has been involved in this issue since 1975 when, in the Mount Laurel I decision, the court found that municipalities should be required to provide their fair share of affordable housing by formulae and not prevent it by exclusionary zoning and permits. The dire need for more housing units for rental and purchase in New Jersey is clear; a family with two low-wage incomes working 40 hours a week cannot afford the average cost of suitable housing. The private sector has not on its own met the demand for affordable housing. Thus, in another decision in 1983, Mount Laurel II, the court found that New Jersey municipalities are obligated to provide their fair share and again created formulae for doing so. The State Legislature in 1985 created the Council on Affordable Housing (COAH) in hope of finding an alternative to endless court actions.

In the years since 1975, some municipalities have indeed used zoning and planning to create homes that working people could afford. An attempt by some municipalities to buy themselves out of providing affordable housing was the Regional Contribution Agreements wherein one municipality (usually a rich, suburban one) paid another municipality (usually a poor, urban one) to build its share of low-cost housing. The court later found this arrangement to be contrary to the principles of the original Mount Laurel court order. However, New Jersey still remains a bastion of towns in which only persons of above-average income can afford to live. Issues raised by the Christie administration in the past three years have resulted in more court cases. Housing advocates sought relief when COAH was taken over as a politically controlled entity, effectively dissolved. The current State administration has attempted to take-over the housing trust funds, which were intended to augment the provision of low- and moderate-income housing. The administration and some municipalities and businesses would like to do affordable housing only by "growth share", basing it on a percent of new residential and commercial growth. The original Mount

Laurel I required each municipality to provide its “fair share” so that all communities would be accessible for the entire population. Under growth share, municipalities can avoid their fair share by stopping growth.

The *growth share vs. fair share* issue is now before the State Supreme Court, as is that of keeping the Affordable Housing Trust Funds for their originally intended purpose. An aspect of the current case is that the League of Municipalities and 11 wealthy municipalities are seeking a weak approach with no check on exclusionary zoning, with affordable housing required to be only 10% of any development. We members of 21 Unitarian Universalist congregations in New Jersey, working through our Legislative Ministry, are very concerned about the need for housing for persons with low and moderate incomes. Our religion is based on upholding the inherent dignity of all people. We are convinced that all persons in this State should be able to live in balanced communities with good schools and recreational and social opportunities as well as proximity to good jobs. We are united in this ethical concern with most of the major religious groups in the State. We find the policies of the current State administration to be lacking in concern for the prosperity of working people. With faith guiding us toward policies which create more democratic and economically just communities, we await the next set of decisions by the New Jersey Supreme Court with hope for decent, affordable housing for all of New Jersey residents.

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