

Ohio Township Association opposing homebuilders push to take away township zoning

Mark Ferenchik

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As central Ohio faces increasing pressure to add housing, battle lines are being drawn over how much say local governments and residents should have in where those developments happen.

Homebuilders are pressuring state legislators to remove residents' ability to defeat zoning changes via referendum and to eliminate non-limited home-rule townships' ability to control zoning decisions.

Not surprisingly, the Ohio Township Association and its members are less than fond of the proposals.

"Oh, absolutely, the OTA is opposed to such ideas," said Heidi Fought, executive director of the township association.

The state gave townships the authority to zone in 1947 when urban development was spilling uncontrolled into townships, Fought said.

Now the Building Industry Association of Central Ohio wants to go back to pre-1947 conditions, she said.

"To us, that's just ridiculous," she said.

The Building Industry Association of Central Ohio presented its report, "Ohio Housing Policy White Paper: Strategies to Address Ohio's Housing and Economic Challenges," on Jan. 31 at the Ohio Chamber of Commerce.

Homebuilders want state lawmakers to eliminate local zoning referendums, create a tax-abatement program that doesn't require school-board approval, and other policies to cut red tape and make it easier for them to build more homes. They say the lack of new homes is slowing growth in Greater Columbus and that builders are not meeting demand across Ohio.

"Our primary concern is being able to build the amount of housing needed, not just central Ohio but throughout the state," said Jon Melchi, executive director of the Building Industry Association of Central Ohio. "What we've seen is a system of approvals and processes that is not working."

He said builders are challenged in both incorporated and unincorporated areas.

"The referendum process has been weaponized to deter development," he said.

Melchi said just because the state legislature gave townships the ability to zone land in the 1940s isn't a good enough reason to keep it in 2024.

"The need is growing every day, building enough housing in central Ohio," he said. "We need a more efficient way to do that. We believe that's as crucial as any issue the legislature is going to be tackling."

'Townships are easy targets'

Fought said that townships should be afforded the same rights municipalities for land-use protections.

"I do think that there's a notion that townships are easy targets," she said.

Blendon, Perry and Prairie townships are the three home-rule townships in Franklin County.

James Jewell, administrator of Prairie Township, a home-rule township of 18,000 in western Franklin County, gave testimony on Jan. 31 before the Ohio Senate Select Committee on Housing.

Jewell testified that the township processed 976 zoning permits from 2018 through 2020.

"If our zoning were to be done through a larger agency such as the county or the state, our residents would no longer receive the exceptional service that our five employees give them," Jewell's testimony read.

Zoning is just a tool that helps control growth, Jewell told The Dispatch. He said that in Prairie Township the zoning process takes about 90 days.

"We treat ours like a living document," he said. If officials see new standards around the community, they revise to the code to match what is acceptable, he said.

Zoning referendum power questioned

Meanwhile, Columbus residents will likely be more aware of zoning issues as city officials revamp the city's zoning code for the first major overhaul in 70 years.

Melchi said that 22 states, including Indiana, North Carolina and Texas, have eliminated zoning referendums.

Asked about the homebuilders push to quash zoning referendums, Brittany Boulton, the new chair of the Clintonville Area Commission, said it is important a platform for local voices is maintained. But she agreed it is difficult to build in this environment when local referendums stall projects.

"I think it merits more discussion," Boulton said, adding that she believes it is unlikely legislators will end zoning referendums.

"Talking about improving the process would be more beneficial to Ohioans," she said.

Voters in Berkshire Township overwhelmingly rejected a proposed housing development via referendum that they called high-density and a potential burden on roads and schools in the central Delaware County area.

Northwest Side resident Holly Hollingsworth had helped lead the charge against a proposed 220-unit apartment complex along Dublin Road near Hilliard. The Columbus Development Commission on Dec. 8 tabled RockRun Developer LLC's request for zoning changes and asked it to come back with a plan that better fits with the single-family neighborhoods surrounding the site at 4747 Dublin Road.

In an email to The Dispatch, Hollingsworth said that "you only have to look to recent statewide ballot initiatives to show the people have an inherent right to change the course of government decisions, and any interference with this process simply reaffirms the need for the process."

mferench@dispatch.com

@MarkFerenchik