

# Little local impact seen for new state housing bill

**By Lauren Otis**  
**Staff Writer**

A state bill that would create incentives to build mixed-income and affordable housing near jobs, town centers and public transportation seems tailor-made for Princeton, but many of the steps proposed in the measure have already been taken here.

That was the conclusion Tuesday of participants in a discussion sponsored by the nonprofit organization Princeton Future.

Chris Sturm, senior director of state policy with New Jersey Future, gave a presentation on the proposed Smart Housing Incentives Act, which is based on successful programs operating in Massachusetts and Connecticut.

If adopted in New Jersey, the law would offer municipalities incentive payments for every new unit in approved "Smart Housing Zones" they created to foster dense, mixed income, well-located, energy-efficient developments, Ms. Sturm said. The program would be funded through payments by developers and grants from the New Jersey Affordable Housing Trust Fund, she said.

"We are the patron saint of what you are looking for," said Borough Administrator Bob Bruschi. "We are the perfect community for it but we are ahead of our time. We have already put the zoning in." Mr. Bruschi said. In addition, downtown Princeton had few sites left where significant developments might go, he said.

"I assume this law is not retroactive, otherwise we'd apply for what we did at the hospital," said Marvin Reed, a member of the Princeton Regional Planning Board and a former borough mayor. Zoning changes at the hospital site, which the University Medical Center at Princeton intends to vacate and sell to a developer, encompass mixed-use mixed-income housing development.

Jim Constantine, with the design firm Looney Ricks Kiss, said zoning has not been a hurdle to building out certain downtown sites, but parking requirements have been.

Mr. Bruschi said it might be possible to combine housing incentives under the new law with some form of parking incentives to enable development of sites downtown that still had not been built out.

Mr. Reed said there were locations outside downtown Princeton where the law could be applied. He described one site between the Whole Earth Center and Bank of America on Nassau Street, and parts of Valley Road and Alexander Street.

Sandra Persichetti, executive director of Princeton Community Housing, said she wished municipalities could adopt the Smart Housing Incentives Act provisions in lieu of presenting state Council on Affordable Housing plans.

COAH is a bureaucracy that is difficult for even an affordable housing agency like hers to navigate, Ms. Persichetti said. Litigation and delays seem to be the main result of COAH affordable housing plans, but with the ability to simply adopt the housing incentives provisions "it would be



a very straightforward solution to our affordable housing, and it would get built," Ms. Persichetti said.

"I'd really like to see COAH say, if you put in this plan and you have results and you have the housing in place, then forget COAH," Mr. Bruschi said.

"In a legal sense this is not going to be an immediate replacement for COAH," Ms. Sturm said. "This does not address how much affordable housing does a town need to provide. It is a voluntary program," she said.

Asked by Princeton Future Managing Director Sheldon Sturges what the prospects for passage of the legislation were, Ms. Sturm replied that the Legislature could possibly pass it this session but the state budget was taking precedence.

Even though the law is considered revenue neutral, "the governor's office is not supporting it right now because they see it as a new program in a time of budget crisis," she said.

*lotis@centraljersey.com*