

Ohio budget puts focus on affordable housing



A bicyclist rides down East Town Street past Topiary Park Crossing, a new affordable housing development that is under construction, on June 6. According to Columbus Downtown Development Corporation, Topiary Park Crossing will feature 98 units that will be rented to qualifying residents based on area median income. JOSEPH SCHELLER/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

2-year spending plan includes tax credits for rental units, single-family housing

Mark Ferenchik

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Housing advocates said new affordable housing initiatives in the state's biennial budget are vital to address the growing need for housing that is becoming too expensive for many.

"It's a great start to move Ohio forward, a tool to create 4,000 units over

the next four years," said Amy Riegel, executive director of the Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio.

The budget the Ohio General Assembly approved on June 30 includes measures that the Senate planned to strip out. That includes \$100 million for a state tax credit program to help finance those 4,000 rental units, and also tax credits for single-family housing.

Riegel said businesses across the

state recognize the need to build more affordable housing for workers as major projects get built. Think Intel's \$20 billion investment for two plants in New Albany expected to employ 3,000, and the new \$3.5 billion battery plant Honda and LE Energy Solution are building in Fayette County southwest of Columbus that is expected to need 2,200 workers.

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State legislators also decided to save the Ohio Housing Finance Agency, which decides what developers receive federal low-income housing tax credits and now will make decisions on the state credits.

"It's the first time the state has had a comprehensive housing policy like this," said Dan Tierney, spokesman for Gov. Mike DeWine, who proposed the \$100 million for the tax credit, which the House had boosted to \$500 million before the legislature scaled it back.

Penny Martin, spokeswoman for the Ohio Housing Finance Agency, said the single-family housing tax credit – \$50 million a year for four years – will make it possible to build housing for moderate-income families, with home prices starting at \$175,000.

She said her agency is working on a pilot program with Zanesville to build 10 houses, each close to 1,800 square feet and with an estimated price of \$175,500.

Martin said what officials learn from the pilot program will help guide the single-family tax credit effort.

"We talked to the governor's office about the idea, to form that partnership with the local communities. They know where they need the housing," she said.

Riegel supported the House's \$500 million tax-credit proposal, but was happy with the \$100 million. She said in too many cases, workers are dealing with higher rents and hour-long commutes.

"I think House members were more finely tuned to the needs on the ground," Riegel said. She said that while the high-profile, big developments get the most attention, most business owners in Ohio



Construction is underway at the Shiloh Apartments at Hamilton and Mount Vernon avenues in the King-Lincoln-Bronzeville District. The project includes 82 apartments. COURTNEY HERGESHEIMER/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

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run small outfits. And if they can't hire or keep workers because of housing shortages or high prices, that could mean turning down orders, hurting sales.

"They understand the impact on the greater community when they can't grow this businesses," she said.

Tierney said business interests in the state were saying that housing as well as a ready workforce are key issues to economic development. "You need to have the sites ready to go, you need the work-

ers," he said.

Riegel's group highlighted the Ohio Housing Finance Agency's Annual Plan that shows 25% of Ohio renters spend at least half their income on housing. The state has a shortage of 270,000 affordable rental units; Ohio has 448,000 extremely low-income renters.

Carlie Boos, executive director of the Affordable Housing Alliance of Central Ohio, said the new state tax credits fill a financing gap when coupled with federal

tax credits. "It's exactly what the state needs," Boos said.

The state funding comes on top of more than \$50 million approved this week by the Columbus Metropolitan Housing Authority for four affordable housing projects in central Ohio: \$18 million for Cobblestone Manor, 82 new senior apartments in Grove City; \$22 million to redevelop Country Ridge apartments, a 95-unit complex in Hilliard; \$9.1 million to allow Sugar Grove Square Apartments in Westerville to remain affordable; and \$3.1 million to allow Westerville Senior Housing to remain affordable.

Riegel said safe, affordable housing also provides better environments for families with newborns. An Ohio Department of Health report in August 2022 said that statewide there were 6.7 infant deaths per 1,000 live births in 2020, down from 6.9 in 2019.

Meanwhile, Black infants deaths during that time period went from 14.3 deaths per 1,000 births to 13.6. In total, 864 infants died before they turned 1 in 2020.

The health department's 2030 goal is 5 or fewer deaths per 1,000 births for every racial group. Black infants died at 2.7 times the rate of white babies.

In Franklin County, 150 infants die each year, according to CelebrateOne, the local organization working to prevent infant mortality.

Riegel said she thinks the DeWine administration understands the role that housing plays in the state.

"I do think that the efforts in this current budget are great steps forward," she said. "It's a snowball. We need it to grow bigger and bigger."

Columbus Dispatch reporter Jim Weiker contributed to this report.

*mferench@dispatch.com
@MarkFerenchik*