

College Park council split on its stance on student housing incentives

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COLLEGE PARK — Contention filled Davis Hall on Jan. 14 after a dispute among College Park city council members during their regular town meeting. In a 5-2 vote, the council will send a letter to the county council in support of a partial surcharge exemption for a proposed student housing project in the city.

In October, Gilbane Development Company sent a letter to the College Park city council requesting that it send a letter to the county council recommending a surcharge exemption on their proposed student housing project. The county applies a school facilities surcharge—\$9,035 per unit inside the beltway—to all new residential developments, given their potential for adding onto costs to public education services.

The city council is encouraged to send recommendations for exemption to projects that promote the University District Vision 2020, a goal set in 2011 to make College Park a top 20 college town by 2020.

Gilbane's proposed Northgate student housing project would sit on 8430 and 8510 Baltimore Avenue in the Northgate district. It is expected to hold nearly 300 dwelling units and a retail space on the ground floor. The University of Maryland also supports the project.

Councilmember P.J. Brennan, however, proposed the letter only recommend partial incentives for the project in support of their proposed environmental work in the area. He did not define what that partial incentive would be.

The exemption, he said, should be offered to affordable housing or housing diversity, as opposed to "luxury student housing," and the surcharge could potentially be used to fix air conditioning and plumbing in public schools.

"Every dollar we can find and put forward is really in our interest," Brennan said in support of Gilbane paying a partial surcharge.

"Come to me with affordable student housing, and we can talk about incentives," he later added.

Councilmember Robert Day, however, proposed that the letter offer no recommendation whatsoever, showing support for student housing but "letting the county do their thing."

"This developer has made a commitment in our city," he said. "They have worked with our city to develop a project that's going to be another landmark in our city."

Thomas Haller, a representative for Gilbane, admitted to the council during the meeting that the developers did not consider the development without the surcharge exemption since no other developer in the city has had to pay the fee, but would accept partial incentives. The council, however, has not recommended exemption for student housing since 2016.

Divisions through the council made themselves clear as Denise Mitchell spoke in support of Day's proposal, while Councilmembers John Rigg and Kate Kennedy supported Brennan's.

Rigg spoke on his experience with his children, who are enrolled in schools where renovations are "sorely needed."

"A whole provision, given the totality of circumstances and my own experiences, is something I'm really struggling to support," he said.

Confusion and tension over wording broke conversations down as Councilmembers Fazlul Kabir and Maria Mackie tried to include their own language to Day's version of the letter, leaving the council in disarray.

Mayor Patrick Wojahn attempted and failed to end debate to move on to the vote on Day's letter, with Day and Mitchell voting to continue discussion. They instead had a recess to settle confusion among council members.

Upon return, council members were sure of their decisions. Mackie, however, suggested that the council be careful of supporting an exemption that would appear unconcerned with school funding.

"We just need to be on record of supporting schools as a council," Councilmember Maria Mackie said. "I don't want us, as a mayor and council, to look that's we're not pro-school. That's the only fear I have."

Her suggestion prompted anger and indignation from Day.

"If there's anybody here that thinks I'm not for these schools or Prince George's County, you would be sorely mistaken," he said. "I have three boys, three African-American boys that I've brought up...All three of them went to public school in Prince George's County."

"If anybody has any question about whether or not I support the schools in Prince George's County, they can come talk to me about it," he continued. "No one ever can challenge the fact that I stand for these schools."

Brennan ended the debate with emphasis that he understood Day and the council were in strong support of schools before Wojahn put the two versions of the letter to a vote.

Day's version of the letter failed in a split 4-3 vote, with Day, Mitchell and Kabul in support. Brennan's version was voted to be sent to the county council, supported by Brennan, Rigg, Kabul, Kennedy and Mackie. Councilmember Monroe Dennis was not in attendance.

Gilbane also requested the city council also grant the project a "city revitalization" tax credit, created as an incentive for developers to build in the city, and would total well over \$500,000 to the project over five years. This decision was easier on the council, which approved the resolution in a unanimous vote.

“It’s a decision that we’re making on behalf of our own city and our own city’s taxpayers,” Rigg said. “It’s a whole lot easier for me to make this sort of targeted choice than it is on behalf of the county.”

Brennan and Rigg, however, continued to highlight their concerns regarding the general concept of waivers for fees that would benefit public facilities and utilities. They both spoke to how scrutinization of such waivers were necessary, as they could potentially “erode the basis” of funding public services.

“The precedent of opting out of paying a fair share for a public service doesn’t sit well with me,” Rigg said. “It underscores a lack of commitment, that I would attribute culturally to our county, to public services.”