



Welfare Advocates

Founded 1979

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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 877

Workgroup on Adaptive Reuse of Vacant Commercial Spaces

House Environment and Transportation Committee

February 16, 2021

Welfare Advocates is a statewide coalition of social service organizations, advocacy groups, faith communities, and community members, whose mission it is to educate ourselves, and the wider community and to advocate for an adequate safety net and public policies that support families moving towards economic stability.

Welfare Advocates supports HB 877, which establishes the Workgroup on Adaptive Reuse of Vacant Commercial Spaces that will study the potential for converting vacant commercial spaces into residential spaces in order to increase affordable housing options.

Affordable housing remains one of the most critical – and difficult to secure – needs for low-income Marylanders. Homelessness and housing instability are public health crises, and dire need for additional affordable housing in Maryland has only been exacerbated by the pandemic. COVID-19 has laid to bare longstanding inequities in our systems, and more and more Marylanders are finding their housing options compromised. Lack of permanent and safe housing, in turn, places individuals at risk for other challenges such as finding employment, taking care of their families, and treating critical medical needs.

It is imperative for Maryland to examine all possible avenues for affordable housing, like HB 877. In Maryland, there is a shortage of approximately 132,506 affordable rental housing units for families earning less than 50% of the area median income (AMI), and as such 77% of families under 50% of AMI in Maryland are housing cost burdened.¹ Given the large and ever growing need for affordable housing in Maryland, coupled with the dire economic ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic, creating a workgroup like HB 877 establishes is a worthy endeavour.

Creating affordable housing out of commercial properties is a sound investment. Homelessness and poverty are extraordinarily expensive to address, and studying how to utilize commercial properties as an avenue to increase affordable housing is a smart investment for the state. Jurisdictions who have undertaken adaptive reuse found it was a cost effective and environmentally friendly solution, both as it reduced the need for new building materials and it does not require an expensive and wasteful demolition. Moreover, moving individuals into safe and reliable housing ultimately saves the state resources that otherwise go to maintain shelters and state-funded safety net programs. We know our individuals and families thrive in economically secure households with stable housing, and thriving families means a thriving economy.

WA appreciates your consideration, and respectfully urges a favorable report on HB 877.

Submitted by Lisa Klingenmaier, Chair of Welfare Advocates

¹ National Low Income Housing Coalition. 2020. Maryland: The Gap. <https://reports.nlihc.org/gap/2018/md>
