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Maryland faces deepening affordable housing crisis



In this April file photo, Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development Secretary Jake Day announces Maryland DHCD's Baltimore Vacants Reinvestment Initiative \$50 million application round. Standing with Day in Gold Street Park are, from left, Housing Commissioner Alice Kennedy, Mayor Brandon Scott, and JohnDre Jennings, Druid Heights CDC executive director. (Kim Hairston/Staff)



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Maryland is grappling with a worsening shortage of affordable housing, according to a July report from the state Department of Housing and Community Development. The gap has left many Marylanders priced out of homeownership, and the majority of renters burdened by high housing costs.

“Our economic goals as a state are being shortchanged by our insufficient housing,” said Jake Day, the Maryland Secretary of Housing and Community Development, in an interview with The Baltimore Sun.

The state, Day said, is already seeing the effects of the housing shortfall. Young people are leaving the state, Day said, because Maryland is not providing them with affordable and abundant housing or high-density, walkable communities.

The pace of home construction has barely increased since 2020, according to the report, exacerbating the housing crisis. Maryland currently has a shortage of at least 275,000 affordable rental units for people earning below 80% of the area median income, the report found.

About 53% of Maryland renters are cost-burdened by their rent, meaning they spend 30% or more of their income on rent. That's the highest percentage among neighboring states and Washington, D.C. Eastern Shore renters are most likely to be cost-burdened, according to the report.

The report points to restrictive local zoning laws and building regulations as major barriers to development. There is a shortage of land zoned for high-density development and a surplus of land designated for low-density development across the state, the report said.

Jack Farrell, a research attorney for pro-housing development firm YIMBY Law, said this is a national issue, but one that can be solved.

"Leaving the question to local officials will not solve the problem," Farrell said. "It did, in fact, create a problem and make it worse. The state taking some more direct authority to make sure that housing is constructed and that it can't be denied for bad or fake reasons would be important."

States can help increase housing density by funding developments, eliminating parking minimums and allowing more high-density construction near public transportation, Farrell said.

Day said Maryland can encourage local governments to rezone by educating them on the process and showing models for rezoning, such as in Montgomery and Anne Arundel counties.

As things currently stand, Maryland is projected to run out of land to build dense housing units by 2045, Day said.

"Zoning is a societal construct — it's something that we have created," Day said. "We can modify it based on the needs of society, and one of the greatest needs our society has today, particularly in the state, is to create more affordable housing."

To keep pace with projected population growth, Maryland will need more than 590,000 new housing units by 2045, the report said. To get to this level of production, Day said the state needs to adapt to more efficient strategies to achieve results.

“For many years, we’ve prioritized process over outcome,” Day said. “When we elevate the principle of efficiency and speed over leaning on process ... we will find that we can achieve results.”

The housing secretary also said that they are looking into methods to incentivize high-density housing development, including through the state’s Housing Expansion and Affordability Act, which was signed into law, allowing for additional development types in single-family-zoned areas and through policies proposed in the stalled Housing for Jobs Act.

Have a news tip? Contact Katharine Wilson at kwilson@baltsun.com.