

The Capital

Senior Housing at Bates Property in Jeopardy

By David Abrams, staff writer
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Senior housing for the long-planned redevelopment of the former Wiley H. Bates High School in Annapolis is endangered by a lack of financing that has sent officials scrambling to secure money from the state.

The House of Delegates was poised to vote today on a bill that could make \$2.8 million in tax credits available for the project. But even passage of the legislation would not guarantee money for what was once the county high school for African Americans.

Without passage of House Bill 679 - which would reorganize the state Heritage Structure Rehabilitation Program - 71 apartments for low-income seniors will be delayed or abandoned, said Leslie Steen, president of the nonprofit Community Preservation and Development Corp. contracted to build the project.

Even if the bill is signed by Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr., the county could lose federal housing credits if it doesn't start work on the apartments by September.

Much of the financing for the \$22 million community center, apartments and senior center is in place, but Ms. Steen said that without the \$2.8 million the apartments might not be built.

In January the project drew a high number in a lottery run by the rehabilitation program that would make it unlikely to receive the aid.

"It jeopardizes (the housing) substantially, because it takes away a very necessary source of funds that we have to replace in some way," said Ms. Steen.

The brick building on Smithville Street was built in 1933 as a segregated school, and is an emotional touchstone for the African-American community. It was integrated in the mid-1960s and closed in 1981.

Plans to restore the building have fallen through amid different political priorities and problems securing the money.

Kathy Koch, executive director of Arundel Community Development Services, a quasi-governmental agency, said she's determined to break ground for the project this fall with or without the apartments.

"The project will happen come hell or high water," she said. "It's taken us 22 years to get where we are."

Ms. Steen said it would be difficult to separate housing from other parts of the project. "It's one building. There are a lot of interrelationships," she said.

The bill sponsored by Del. Sheila Hixson, D-Montgomery, would allow the state to grant between \$25 million and \$30 million a year through the program. The measure is similar to House Bill 289, introduced on behalf of Mr. Ehrlich.

This year, 121 applications for the credit were received. The applications are assigned numbers based on when they were submitted and then entered into a lottery.

For the 25 projects chosen, the state issues a tax credit equal to about 20 percent of the cost of renovations to a historic building. The Bates project is 112th on the list.

Under an amendment to Ms. Hixson's bill, no jurisdiction would receive more than half of the credits.

House Speaker Michael E. Busch said that would at least give Anne Arundel a chance.

"In essence, all of the money is going to Baltimore," said Mr. Busch, D-Annapolis.

As of September, Baltimore had received more than 92 percent of the commercial tax credits, or \$105 million.

Anne Arundel received \$400,383. Frederick, which ranked second in tax credits, received only 4 percent of the total.

Under the current rules, the county has to wait in line behind dozens of other projects to qualify for a tax credit even if the state increases the total amount awarded.

"Unfortunately, it seems unlikely it and many other projects will be able to get funded in 2004," said Dan Sams, a preservation officer with the Maryland Historical Trust, which administers the program.

Supporters of the Bates project hope that amendments to Ms. Hixson's bill might open the door to other projects.

Since 1997, 14 county and Annapolis projects have received tax credits to supplement about \$5 million in renovations, including the old Waterwitch Hook and Ladder firehouse in Annapolis and Twin Oaks Mansion in Linthicum, Mr. Sams said.