

THE BALTIMORE BANNER

HUD investigating Baltimore County housing discrimination complaint

Hallie Miller

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Angela



Angela Coleman, president and founder of Sisterhood Agenda, poses for a portrait on the property she aims to transform into housing in Middle River, Maryland, on Aug. 22, 2024. (Eric Thompson/for The Baltimore Banner)

A developer said county interference with her 'holistic housing' project could derail it

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development is investigating a housing discrimination complaint against Baltimore County government leaders after an Owings Mills business owner alleged being obstructed from a development opportunity based on her race and gender.

Angela D. Coleman, the leader of an organization called Sisterhood Agenda Inc., filed the complaint with HUD in April and received notification in May that it had been accepted by the federal government for investigation, according to documents reviewed by The Baltimore Banner. Coleman said she had hoped to break ground last year on a housing project in Middle River that would have created eco-friendly duplexes at affordable prices for renters. She planned 22 units for the development about a half-mile from Bengies Drive-In Theatre.

Coleman had already purchased one parcel. She said the councilman who represents the area, David Marks, has proposed changing the zoning on an adjacent county-owned parcel she was considering purchasing, making it not feasible to build



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In emails reviewed by The Banner, Marks told a concerned constituent that he opposed the project and would block the sale and development of the land.

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“As a general rule, I do not support the county selling off its valuable land — open space — for development,” Marks wrote in the email. In a separate email, he said he could have the properties “downzoned” to further block development there. And in another email, Del. Kathy Szeliga, a state lawmaker who represents Baltimore County, thanked Marks for “taking a stand” against “section 8 or low income apartments,” which she said she was “adamantly opposed” to.

Szeliga did not respond to requests for comment.

Marks declined a request for an interview, citing the pending HUD complaint; HUD also declined to comment.

The conflict underscores [the unique challenges housing providers face in Baltimore County](#), where council members wield the ultimate authority over their districts. It also comes as the county [races to add more affordable housing](#) to satisfy a



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Polling shows [wide support among Marylanders](#) for local lawmakers to provide a more hands-on approach to remedy high housing and rent prices. But on the ground, county representatives say constituent views toward housing are far more nuanced than polls suggest.

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In an emailed statement, Marks said he has recommended downzoning “hundreds” of acres of land to preserve county parks and vegetation. The Eastern Avenue corridor has been the location of “numerous crashes,” he added, and neighbors have asked him to curb growth there.

He said, as a concession, he would not recommend rezoning the parcel Coleman already owns.

The Baltimore County Council will vote on a series of proposed zoning changes Tuesday, closing out a procedure known as the Comprehensive Zoning Map Process. It occurs in the county every four years and offers council members the power to decide which development projects can move forward in their districts.

In Baltimore County, council members generally extend



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typically has the final say over development in his or her district.

If another member opposed the district representative's opinion, they would need to assemble at least four votes to overrule them.

Coleman said she didn't expect her development project to become "political."

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Her organization, which supports women and girls, had hoped to help the county meet its goal of adding more affordably priced units by 2027, terms that are part of a 2017 consent decree with the federal government to rectify decades of discriminatory housing practices. She said county administrators had expressed support for her vision and encouraged her to seek funding from the Department of Housing and Community Development.

A trauma survivor, Coleman said she has been working with vulnerable populations since graduating college. She runs Sisterhood Agenda — which advocates, conducts research and provides educational resources for women and girls — out of her Owings Mills office. She said the group also owns and operates



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environmentally resilient housing for long- and short-term rentals.

The organization had hoped to build a similar site in the Baltimore-Washington area and applied to be HUD-certified. Coleman then got to work assembling a team and winning over county leaders, some of whom expressed support for her endeavor, she said.

In 2022, Coleman applied for financial assistance from the county's housing department to help finance the project. That same year, she purchased about 1.4 acres of land, according to state land records, with a goal of acquiring about 9 additional acres owned by the county. She said the units would be priced to accommodate households earning from 30% to 60% of the area median income — from about \$36,000 to \$67,600 for a four-person household — earnings that are typical of the surrounding neighborhood.

But the following spring, the site's neighbors in Middle River caught wind of the plans and began to push back.

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One neighbor who lives on the street where Sisterhood Agenda hopes to build reported the group to county code enforcers after noticing a large construction trailer — which she had described as a shipping container — near her property, according to emails reviewed by The Banner. She has started an online petition, in which she outlined her opposition to the project. And she’s also called on her local representatives — including Marks — to intervene.

Coleman has since sued that neighbor for defamation and other claims, according to court records, and seeks \$225,000 in damages.

Patricia Payne, a longtime Middle River community member, said though neighbors recognize the importance of affordable housing, they have concerns about their street being large enough to accommodate as many as 22 new households.

“The road is not fit for that,” Payne said. She added that many residents there are older and live on fixed incomes, making it difficult for them to move.

Erica Palmisano, a spokeswoman for Baltimore County Executive Johnny Olszewski Jr., said in a statement Tuesday that the administration is aware of the dispute. The county is working to connect Sisterhood Agenda with financial resources, she added,



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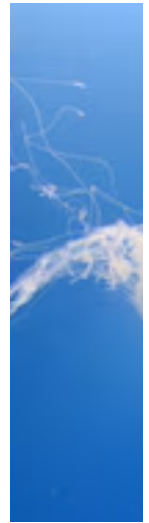
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