



Sarah Kenney &lt;skenney@barringtonhills-il.gov&gt;

## VBH BOT FYI Zoning

1 message

**Robert Kosin <rkosin@barringtonhills-il.gov>**  
To: Dolores Trandel <clerk@barringtonhills-il.gov>  
Cc: Sarah Kenney <skenney@barringtonhills-il.gov>

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Residents, trustees struggle with lack of consensus on affordable housing  
By John P. Huston Chicago TribLocal reporter  
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As trustees begin a discussion about an affordable housing plan more than five years in the making, scores of Winnetka residents wonder why a plan is needed at all for the North Shore community.

Many argued this week at a public hearing that the divisive debate over the issue should have been rendered moot by a 2005 vote to become "home rule" — a vote, they said was intended to prevent a state affordable housing law from applying to their town.

Communities without home rule status are bound to follow state law establishing affordable housing guidelines. Where home rule reigns, local officials can create their own standards.

Village Attorney Katherine Janega said Winnetka officials made a commitment with residents to create a customized plan for affordable housing. But opponents suggested that having no plan is a plan in itself.

Many residents pleaded with the village council to put the matter on the ballot for residents to decide, rather than forge ahead with something that could end up costing current property owners money — and perhaps alter the nature of a village where the median home price last year was \$1.1 million, and the median household income topped \$201,000.

"We voted for home rule, that's a matter of record," said resident Bob Mucci, adding that "outside interests want this for our community. But we in Winnetka don't want it, so I think we should say, 'Thank you very much.'"

Miki Stavros told trustees he wanted a "binding referendum" on the ballot, "so those who live here and pay taxes can vote and have their opinion" heard.

"I think you need a referendum for people to vote to see if they want to go through all this social engineering," said former Winnetka resident June O'Donoghue, now of Northfield.

Katie Seigenthaler countered that term with another.

"Rather than calling this 'social engineering,' we prefer to call it 'love thy neighbor,'" Seigenthaler said.

But Janega, the village attorney, had bad news for residents calling for a "binding referendum" to poll residents on the matter: There is no such tactic. Binding referendums are not available on policy issues at the municipal level, she said.

An advisory referendum could be attempted, she noted, adding that it's an expensive education campaign and requires an easily understood "yes" or "no" question on the ballot.

The affordable housing plan that trustees are considering isn't as simple as that. It includes six components recommended by the Plan Commission aimed at increasing the number of affordable units in town.

Just settling on the language for a referendum question could be as divisive as the issue itself, noted Trustee King Poor.

"We would have to have a referendum about how to ask the question," Poor quipped.

Residents crammed into the council chamber to hear details of the affordable housing proposal, and to offer their own comments. The 34 people who spoke were evenly split on the issue — for and against.

Trustee Gene Greable said it troubles him that the village can't reach a consensus on how to proceed on affordable housing.

"We don't have consensus that we had to do this. Maybe it's 60/40, but it's not good and I don't like it," Greable said.

"You know, Gene, there are some things in this world you're never going to get consensus on, and this is one of them," responded Trustee Christopher Rintz, adding that trustees are elected to make tough decisions.

Greable questioned Janega whether the village is required to enact the affordable housing plan, which would amend the current plan that was adopted in 2005 when the village voted to become a home rule community.

Janega said the council would open the village up to litigation if it repealed the plan currently on the books, as some residents have suggested.

Without a plan of its own, Winnetka would be required to follow an Illinois law requiring at least 10 percent of its housing to be priced at levels deemed "affordable," she said.

If Winnetka opted to withdraw its current plan from the books, it would become the only community in the state without an affordable housing plan — and possibly entice a lawsuit, Janega said.

Trustees agreed they didn't want to gamble on being sued by the state.

"We're painting a target on ourselves if we pull back and become the only community without a plan," Poor said.

The village council requested that staff draft ordinances based on three of the Plan Commission's six affordable housing recommendations.

The other three were sent back to the group for additional research.

"This is the beginning of a conversation, not the end of a conversation," Poor said. "There's too many pieces."

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