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## Council kills anonymous complaints bill Disappointed supporters of measure say 'it's not over'

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The County Council unanimously rejected a contentious bill Monday that would have abolished anonymous zoning complaints

Under the bill, people who tattled on their neighbors for violations such as overgrown grass or junk in front yards would have had to attach their names to the complaints.

It had been pushed by a north county property rights group that has been critical of the way county zoning inspectors do their jobs, saying zoning officers act like vigilantes and harass residents.

The group offered no proof of those claims, and county officials denied them. Civic groups from Severna Park and Linthicum opposed the bill, saying anonymous complaints are necessary to enforce local laws.

"I really don't need anyone to tell me what, I think, is blatantly obvious: This bill needs to be killed," Councilman Ed Middlebrooks, R-Severn, said early in the day.

The proposal was introduced by former councilman Ed Reilly a week before he was nominated to fill a vacant state Senate seat. Reilly attended Monday night's meeting in Annapolis to watch his successor, former county Board of Education member Tricia Johnson, R-Davidsonville, be sworn in as a council member.

"This is a new challenge," Johnson said after being sworn in by Clerk of the Circuit Court Robert Duckworth. "And I'm going to dedicate myself to the hard work, whatever it takes."

Reilly purposefully left the meeting before the vote.

"It's not mine to vote on. I made my public statements, and the council knows what I think about the issue," Reilly said, adding that he had hoped it would pass.

"You don't put in legislation hoping it fails."

A month ago about 200 people turned out for a council meeting to debate the measure; some supported it, while others hotly contested it. About a dozen wore red T-shirts that read, "Stop The Zoning Gestapo."

Despite opponents' concerns, all seven council members voted against the bill.

Councilman Ron Dillon, R-Pasadena, said he was concerned that removing anonymity in zoning complaints could turn neighbors against one another.

"Ultimately that will result in violence," he said.

Pasadena business owner Thomas Redmond, an unofficial spokesman for residents who supported the bill, expressed disappointment at the council's decision. While members of his group, PROPO, realized they didn't have enough support on the council to succeed Monday night, they won't give up, he said.

"It's not over. We'll just take a different approach," said Redmond, a former councilman who is running for his old seat in 2010. "We'd like to see some legislation to keep inspectors from doing the anonymous zoning complaints. We'll have to see."

Council Chairwoman Cathy Vitale, D-Severna Park, said she would look into some specific cases she heard about zoning officers.

"It is my understanding that a lot of the frustration is coming from their perceptions of our officers, so I intend to follow up on that," she said.

Tax deferral

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The council also on Monday unanimously passed a bill designed to encourage more senior citizens to take advantage of a deferred property tax program.

Disabled residents and residents older than 65 can choose not to pay tax bills annually. They can instead settle their tab with the county when their homes are sold or if they die, when it would be passed on to their heirs.

Under the current program, those deferred bills accumulate 6 percent interest each year. The bill cuts that interest rate to zero. Currently, only four people have taken advantage of the program, and the accumulated interest on the deferred amounts is \$8,085, according to the county auditor.

"We're hoping this will help more people now that we've eliminated the interest cost," said Alan Friedman, the county's director of legislative affairs.

In other action, the council voted to issue more than \$735 million in bonds. They will finance annual school, road and other construction projects in the county budget.

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