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State lawmaker calls for building timeout

Rep. Freeman to hold public forum today on proposed bill.

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EASTON | Like a sports team in need of regrouping, state Rep. Bob Freeman thinks municipalities could use a timeout.

Freeman, D-Northampton, will host a public forum today to discuss whether municipalities should be allowed to impose a development moratorium while they rewrite comprehensive plans or zoning and land use ordinances.

Freeman said moratoriums were popular at the local level until 2001, when the state Supreme Court ruled municipalities had no authority to impose them. Under a bill proposed by Freeman, municipalities could stop accepting development plans for up to one year while they review those ordinances.

"The bill has been introduced a couple sessions in a row," he said. "In the past, we weren't able to get it out of (local government) committee, but now that I'm the chairman, it looks a little better that we can send this bill to the floor for consideration."

Freeman has invited local municipal officials and members of the Pennsylvania Builders Association to the hearing and hopes the public will turn out as well.

Matt Glennon, a supervisor in Plainfield Township and a member of the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission, said a moratorium would have served his board well several years ago.

"Here's the dirty little secret," he said. "At this point, almost every community has a comprehensive plan. But the on-the-ground zoning doesn't conform to it. That's the hard part."

Glennon said it's not uncommon for developers to sneak in plans while zoning laws are being reconsidered, grandfathering developments under the restrictions of the old laws. A moratorium would put an end to that practice.

But builders and developers think there are better ways to help municipal government.

Mark Mitman of the Pennsylvania Builders Association Lehigh Valley chapter said the law would place severe restrictions on the state's third-largest economic contributor.

"We recognize that municipalities are in a difficult situation," he said. "But the real problem is that supervisors are volunteers, working with limited staff and small budgets."

"If the state really wanted to help, they could aggressively offer technical and financial resources to those governments," he said. "That way, ordinances and laws are updated along the way, instead of calling for a timeout and operating in crisis mode."

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