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## **Another Milestone on NJ's Road to Fair Housing** by Dianne Brake

A neighborhood of small homes was being torn down in a section of Mt. Laurel in Burlington County. It was 1971 and Ethel Lawrence, a long-time resident, stood up at her council meeting to protest the large-lot zoning. The zoning, she said, prevented the construction of new housing that she and her neighbors could afford. Her Mayor replied, in a quote that became famous, "If you can't afford to live here, go some place else."

Ethel Lawrence refused to take that as the final answer. With three crusading lawyers and the support of the South Burlington County NAACP, she took her case all the way to New Jersey's Supreme Court.

The result in her favor came in 1975. It was the first milestone on New Jersey's road to fair housing.

The ruling, supported by another in 1983, became the basis for what became known as the Mt. Laurel Doctrine. For far too long, the Court ruled, cities and downtowns have housed more than their share of poor people within their regions - to the extent of concentrating poverty. All communities should take a "fair share" of the region's poor.

In spite of these rulings, the 1985 Fair Housing Act, which was intended to implement the Mt. Laurel Doctrine, established a new obstacle to be overcome by Ethel Lawrence, and many like her who needed more housing choices in suburban communities. This obstacle was called RCAs, an acronym for Regional Contribution Agreements.

RCAs established a loophole for fast-growing suburban communities to pay poorer communities to take up to 50% of their affordable housing obligation. They allowed suburban towns to continue to restrict housing opportunities and keep many households trapped in communities of concentrated poverty. RCAs flaunted the Mt. Laurel Doctrine.

For years, pundits said that RCAs could never be abolished. But they were proved wrong.

Last week, thanks to the tenacious leadership of Assembly Speaker Joe Roberts, with the backing of the New Jersey Regional Coalition, a powerful grassroots coalition of people who demanded that public officials do the right thing, Governor Corzine signed a law, known as A-500, abolishing RCAs. To see PlanSmart NJ's expert testimony during the

legislative hearings, [click here](#).

Over 500 people stood in the hot sun to witness the historic signing in a historically important location. They gathered on a grassy square in the middle of the Ethel Lawrence Homes - a development of new, attractive homes that were named in her honor, and built by Fair Share Housing Center, an organization started by one of the three attorneys who helped Ethel Lawrence bring her case all the way to the NJ Supreme Court.

In spite of the significance of enacting A-500 celebrated on that hot day, it was just one milestone on the road to fair housing in New Jersey. There is far more ground to cover.

Already there are rumors about re-opening A-500. New Jersey's established affordable housing programs, overseen by the Council on Affordable Housing, have been mired in litigation for almost 10 years, and its new regulations are attracting even more lawsuits from all sides.

The debate of housing is in desperate need of re-framing. Affordable housing is not simply an obligation imposed by an activist Court. Having enough housing, affordable to households at all income levels is in New Jersey's economic self-interest.

Without housing near jobs, we have a transportation problem. Without enough housing affordable to the workforce, we are at risk of having jobs relocate to where the workforce is living - increasingly, out of state.

Here is a case in point: In 1980, in central Jersey's Route 1 Corridor, a primary economic engine for the state, there was almost one house for every job. By 2000, the ratio had almost doubled, only one house for every two jobs. And the 2000 US Census showed that jobs had begun to move to Pennsylvania, where many of the workers in the Route 1 Corridor were already living - where they had to go to find housing they could afford. With gas prices at over \$4 per gallon, this mismatch between jobs and housing cannot be sustained.

Fighting RCAs has been one of the most controversial battles in which PlanSmart NJ has ever been engaged. But we maintain our commitment to seek ever more effective ways to improve housing in New Jersey, for as long as it takes.

We are proud to have been a founding member of the New Jersey Regional Coalition and proud to have backed Speaker Roberts in his historic crusade. It shows us - again - what leadership and organizing toward a goal can achieve.

We are happily reminded, in fact, of the truth articulated by Margaret Mead many years ago, "A small group of thoughtful people can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

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