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Fulton considering first local ordinance on fair housing in Georgia

By Gary Hendricks

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Fulton County may become the first local government in Georgia to adopt a fair housing ordinance, but it cannot be any stronger than the state's new law and will not cover either the elderly or situations where children are barred from all adult apartment complexes, a county commissioner said Monday night.

Interim Commissioner Gordon Joyner, who was a fair housing official in the Carter administration, wrote the Fulton proposal and said he was optimistic pending federal legislation will expand the classifications and Georgia will adopt them.

I had hoped to include age and those situations of all-adult complexes" in his proposal, Joyner said. He said that he will urge the commission to adopt an ordinance that tracks Georgia's law, signed this month by Gov. Joe Frank Harris, at the body's Wednesday meeting. Under the present law, protection under the fair housing laws on the federal and state level is based on race, color, religion and national origin. The Georgia law says that no city or county can go beyond the requirements of the state law. It requires a fair housing officer, either on the state or local level, to attempt to mediate and reconcile the complaint. A complaining party can sue, if dissatisfied with the conciliation result, Joyner said.

Joyner also said that the Georgia law does not have any criminal provisions, thus knocking out the misdemeanor section that had been included in his proposal. Housing discrimination is "most effectively attacked at the local level," he said during a public hearing Monday night on the proposal. No one appeared to oppose the ordinance, but organizations represented at the hearing were the independent Metro Fair Housing Services, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Atlanta Board of Realtors, Georgia Real Estate Commission, Georgia Association of Realtors and the office of U.S. Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.). Kathryn Harris, director of Metro Fair Housing, urged the adoption of the Fulton regulation, because people sometimes are dissuaded from filing a federal action, she said. She said 98 percent of the 200 annual complaints her organization receives a year are based on race.

The proposed Fulton ordinance would create a Fair Housing Director, who would handle complaints. He would attempt to get the complaining party and the owner or renter to work out a settlement before proceeding to court. Most conciliations resolved in favor of the complainant call for monetary awards, he said. Joyner said the director and his staff would not cost Fulton any additional money, because the job would be performed by the county's Affirmative Action and Contract Compliance Office, which has not yet been set up. He also said that the county could obtain about \$50,000 in federal money annually to help with the mediation process.

While there appears to be no increase in housing discrimination complaints in Fulton, the problem is "continuing," according to Joyner. He said that Atlanta was among 40 cities in a nationwide survey which showed that minorities stood an 80 percent chance of encountering discrimination on rental property, and a 40 percent chance when attempting to buy a house.

A local ordinance would provide access for complainants without "having to go running to the federal or state government. It is a local problem anyway," Ms. Harris said.

Joyner introduced the proposed ordinance Dec. 31. He said that he would like to see it adopted this month, because April is Fair Housing Month.

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