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**Housing court for Baltimore opposed
Top judges say system can accommodate cases**

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Maryland's top judges urged legislators yesterday to kill a bill that would create a housing court in Baltimore with two new judges, citing a lack of cases to warrant the new court or the extra positions.

"We don't want that judge sitting in a courtroom doing nothing," Judge Martha F. Rasin, chief of the state's District Court system, told the House Judiciary Committee in Annapolis.

Chief Judge Robert M. Bell of the Court of Appeals said he believes city housing cases can be handled in the District Court, as they are now.

"We will use the resources that we have," Bell said.

The two said that on several days over the past three months, the docket for city housing cases was never filled -- and sometimes had no cases.

Their opposition dealt the housing court proposal a severe blow, and its chances in the General Assembly appear slim.

Bell indicated that part of his concern was that the state judiciary is requesting six new judges for courts in other parts of Maryland where he sees a greater need.

Baltimore housing officials want the new court to help them settle landlord-tenant disputes and punish property owners who refuse to repair dilapidated and vacant buildings.

On behalf of the housing officials, city legislators are pushing four bills to fight blight, including the proposal for the housing court. The judges supported the other three bills.

Those measures would do such things as restrict the ability of property owners to appeal fines and contempt orders; allow the use of citations for minor housing offenses; and set up an administrative board to resolve nuisance complaints.

"These bills will not solve the city's sanitation and substandard housing problems," Housing Commissioner Daniel P. Henson III told the committee.

"They are not a silver bullet. But they will enable us to use the tools of code enforcement more efficiently and effectively," he said.

Del. Peter A. Hammen, a Baltimore Democrat and the lead sponsor of the four bills, said he and other legislators are negotiating the possibility of having one of the city's 24 judges designated for housing issues.

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