

Editorial: Metro failing to meet housing goals

Most cities lag far behind on affordable housing targets.

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The poet Robert Frost couldn't linger in the woods, he wrote, because he had "promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep."

Dozens of Twin Cities local governments have miles to go in keeping promises made a decade ago to expedite affordable housing within their borders. More than 100 metro cities, as part of the Livable Communities Act of 1995, pledged to add 106,000 affordable homes by 2010. In exchange, the Metropolitan Council offered a broad array of development grants.

Now, 12 years later, the cities should be at least two-thirds of the way along on their goals. But most have fallen far short, producing fewer than 42,000 affordable units, or about 40 percent of the target.

Some are doing well. St. Paul and New Brighton have exceeded their 2010 goals. Minneapolis, Chaska, Coon Rapids, Minnetonka and Burnsville are ahead of schedule. Eagan, Stillwater and Eden Prairie are nearing their goals on rental units.

Other cities have made little progress, according to an analysis of 2005 Met Council statistics by TCHousingPolicy.org, a research effort of St. Paul's Housing Preservation Project and the University of Minnesota. Among major suburbs, St. Louis Park, Brooklyn Park, Forest Lake, Apple Valley, Lakeville, Woodbury, Bloomington and Maple Grove are falling far short. Excuses abound. Most frequently cited are high land costs and low-density zoning that forbids small lots and multifamily housing. Opportunities for affordable housing are so bleak in the St. Croix valley that Washington County recently returned \$440,789 in tax credits to the state for lack of proposals and possible sites.

Local governments can do nothing about land prices. But they can, and should, provide the zoning to help achieve their affordable housing goals. If they can't do that, they should offer density bonuses, or set-asides that require a few affordable units in every market-rate project.

In reviewing a new round of comprehensive plans next year, the Metropolitan Council should cast a skeptical eye on cities falling short of housing targets. How can cities that failed to deliver in the 1995-2010 period be trusted to succeed in the 2011-2020 period to be covered by the new plans?

Good plans aren't enough, said Timothy Thompson, president of the Housing Preservation Project. "You have to act," he said, citing Chaska for actively seeking affordable developments.

Indeed, a stronger political will and a greater sense of regional obligation is needed. More than 170,000 lower-income families live in housing they cannot afford. The central cities and inner suburbs should not be expected to house all of the region's needy. A

metropolitan community cannot be truly strong and competitive without sharing this and other responsibilities.

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