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Counterpoint: Local housing solutions are best addressed by cities

Here's what won't help — and what will.

By David Unmacht, Patricia Nauman, Bradley Peterson, Cap O'Rourke and James B. Hovland

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MARK VANCELEAVE, STAR TRIBUNE

About 73% of the residential land in the Twin Cities metropolitan area is zoned for single-family homes like those in this Prior Lake neighborhood, the Star Tribune reported in a front-page presentation Aug. 8, asserting that such policies perpetuate

City governments are doing their part every day to address wide-ranging and complex housing challenges — including the legacy of systemic racism in housing — through locally identified solutions and policy innovation. From

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senior living to preservation of affordable housing, every community's mix of specific housing priorities is different. Zoning is an important tool for achieving that mix. However, an association representing for-profit residential developers ("[How Twin Cities housing rules keep the metro segregated.](#)" Aug. 8) and a group of state legislators ("[Minnesota legislators aim to spur creation of more entry-level housing.](#)" Aug. 10) are singling out municipal zoning authority and fees associated with development as significant barriers to housing affordability in need of a legislative fix.

Proposed legislation announced by state Rep. Steve Elkins that would impose a one-size-fits-all zoning policy on every city would, instead, harm community efforts to increase affordable housing. This legislation already has been considered in previous legislative sessions without becoming law, and is limited in scope, by primarily addressing the construction of new market-rate, single-family housing.

Needed: Full housing spectrum solutions and local innovation support

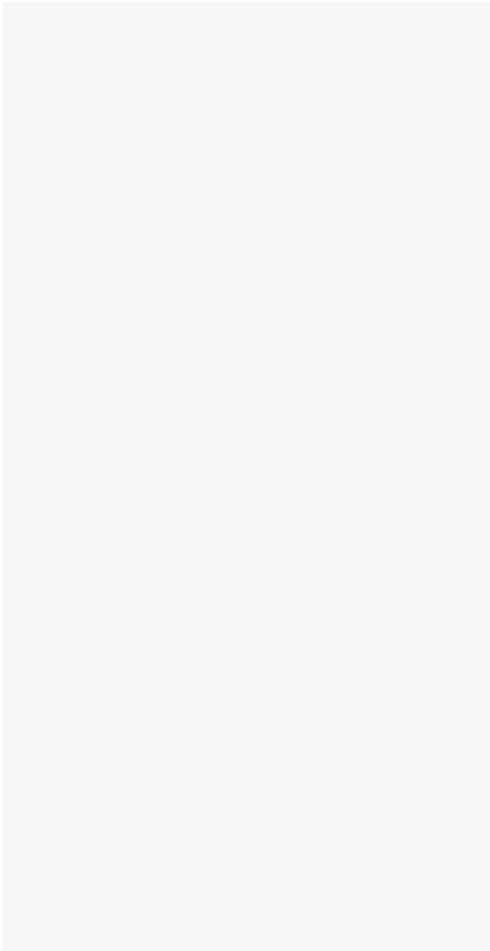
Preemption over local zoning, as proposed by Elkins, does not solve the challenge of affordable housing shortages, nor does it guarantee the affordability of new market-rate housing. Affordable housing, as well as other local housing needs that include workforce housing, senior housing and transitional housing, require flexible tools and resources that foster local innovation, including adequately funded state housing programs and policy changes that help address market failures and challenges across the entire housing spectrum. The attacks on city zoning authority are a distraction from more meaningful discussions about meeting critical workforce housing needs that are prevalent in parts of the state.

Despite many cities already adopting local zoning ordinances to encourage development of more affordable housing — such as smaller lot sizes, accessory dwelling units, reduced parking minimums, setback adjustments, density bonuses and paying for soil remediation, developers in many cases have failed to seize these opportunities to build the affordable housing they claim is a priority. Instead, they are maximizing what can be built, leaving us to assume only that they are looking to also maximize profits, not provide affordable housing for Minnesotans.

Statewide preemption of local zoning authority can't force a developer to build less profitable housing in a competitive market any more than a local zoning policy can. While rezoning land for higher density might result in the construction of more multifamily units, higher density does not ensure affordability, nor does it necessarily increase homeownership. Though a silver-bullet policy fix is always appealing compared to a call for investment, the reality is that the cost of land, construction materials and labor alone make it difficult to construct more affordable housing.

Needed: Incentives instead of mandates

Solving the challenge of providing adequate affordable housing requires collaboration among the public and private sectors — including residential developers that cities work closely with — and nonprofit agencies, additional resources, innovation and flexibility. For example, in addition to these development incentives, cities are working with partners to establish local housing trust funds, apply for state and federal resources, support first-time home buyers with education and down payment assistance, and create housing preservation programs. These steps help to address market realities and meet cities' locally identified housing challenges without the need for a one-size-fits-



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all state mandate.

Needed: Community-specific solutions throughout Minnesota

The appropriate role for the state is to refrain from imposing local zoning and land use decisions that should be left to local officials. Instead, lawmakers can best help communities by offering incentives for development of affordable housing stock, encouraging local innovation, focusing efforts on the total spectrum of housing needs in our communities and partnering with Minnesota cities to address the unique housing challenges in both the Twin Cities metro area and greater Minnesota.

Our associations look forward to continuing working with state leaders to advance the shared goal of affordability without compromising the authority of local officials to make zoning decisions that best fit the needs of their individual communities.

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