



Education and Housing Equity Project Records.

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Star Tribune Editorial

Our perspective

Community circles

Support talks on housing, education

In many cultures, most notably Native American, the circle is an important symbol. It can stand for beginning and ending; it can represent the cycle of birth, life and death. Or it can simply be the way people organize themselves to discuss issues, solve problems or protect one another.

That symbolism is at the heart of a local effort to get folks thinking and talking about education, race and housing. A coalition of more than 20 Twin Cities partners, the Community Circle Collaborative, is wisely promoting a metrowide series of small group discussions on this question: How does racial and economic segregation of housing affect educational achievement and life opportunities?

The idea is to get at least 200 people (five to 15 at a time) actively involved in study circles. Ideally, each group will be as diverse as possible across racial, ethnic, economic, age and political lines. They will be urban and suburban, work from a common discussion/information guide and will meet several times for two to three hours. Sessions will take place early next year.

Among the organizing partner groups are the Minneapolis Initiative Against Racism, the Minnesota Minority Education Partnership, the Minneapolis, Edina and St. Louis Park public schools, the Institute on Race & Poverty and the Minnesota Fair Housing Center.

Do the organizers have an agenda? You bet. They start from the basic belief that racism and segregation hurt everyone. They know that many students who perform poorly in school

come from deep pockets of segregated, low-income housing. And they rightly agree these housing, family and economic questions must be addressed to help improve educational outcomes.

The Collaborative has a direction, but it doesn't have all the answers. And so, the small circles are designed to get civil, informed dialogue and analysis bubbling up from citizens. The questions and solutions will then be used to guide policies and practices of government, school boards, nonprofits, foundations, businesses and grass-roots groups. Community circles have been used successfully in other cities around the country to help form public policy and build public awareness and consensus.

All metro-area residents are huge stakeholders in this issue. Parents and singles alike pay for public schools, police, courts and prisons. Both the young and the old want safe neighborhoods and good housing. Whether you are black or white, rich or poor, well-educated children eventually help fuel a stronger economy and higher quality of life for everyone.

With help from the Bush and Bremer foundations, the Collaborative will provide recorders and train facilitators for each circle. For more details, attend the kick-off/information session on Tuesday, 9-11:30 a.m., at the St. Louis Park City Council Chambers, 5005 Minnetonka Blvd. Or call Dick Little, at the Education & Housing Equity Project, 871-8980.

Join the circle of those who want better housing and education opportunities in the Twin Cities.

Our perspective

Affordable housing

Support plan for mixed-income projects

Like a pebble dropped in a pond, the critical shortage of affordable housing ripples through the Minnesota community. A small but creative effort to smooth the shortage and dampen the ripples is making its way through the Legislature. It deserves to survive the hurly-burly of partisan dealmaking.

A recent national study found that children in unstable, substandard homes have more health problems, including stunted growth, asthma attacks and exposure to burns. Some of those same children, who live in shelters or move frequently, also perform poorly in school. For their parents, finding and keeping a job is a challenge without a permanent address.

In the Twin Cities, an estimated 189,000 families pay far more than they can afford for rent. That means they constantly make tough choices between rent and food, clothing and medicine. Businesses also have a hard time filling entry-level jobs when potential employees can't find a place to live nearby.

For those and other reasons, a creative legislative proposal that would help expand the supply of affordable housing deserves support. Called the inclusionary housing policy, the plan addresses many of the financial and social obstacles to creating moderately priced homes and apartments. Here's how it would work:

A modest new account of \$6 million to \$8 million would be set up with the Metropolitan Council — half of the funds designated for the 13-county metro area, the other half for the remainder of Minnesota. Cities would apply for loans and grants to develop mixed-income housing that would include at least 10 percent affordable rental units or 15 percent lower-priced ownership units.

In addition, the proposal allows municipalities to relax their building regulations as an incentive to involve private builders. For example, these developments might receive density waivers, allowing builders to construct more units on a parcel of land.

This smart approach to a tough problem offers something for just about all the stakeholders: It brings cities and builders together to negotiate; it offers developers regulatory relief and it leverages other government or nonprofit funding. It also addresses community/neighborhood perceptions of low-income developments by requiring a mix of homes for high- and middle-income families as well. The plan should also help companies solve some of their worker shortage problems.

In the Twin Cities, there are 78,000 low-income renters and only 39,000 affordable units. Subsidized housing waiting lists around the metro area are two to five years long. Clearly, more reasonably priced homes and apartments are needed for the poor. However, other beneficiaries of expanding the housing stock would include moderate-income families, single people, retired seniors and young adults.

As housing legislation makes its way to conference committee, the major points of the inclusionary plan should be preserved. The House version is an anemic shadow of the original (it would slash the allocation to a paltry \$1.6 million). Senate lawmakers should strive to meet or exceed the original funding level.

By itself, that \$6 million to \$8 million won't do much. But when used as incentive to encourage federal, city, foundation and private investment, a small amount of state aid could make a powerfully big difference.

April 12, 1999

Senator Richard J. Cohen
317 Capitol Building
75 Constitution Avenue
St. Paul MN 55155

Re: Senate File 1010 – Inclusionary Housing Program

Dear Senator Cohen:

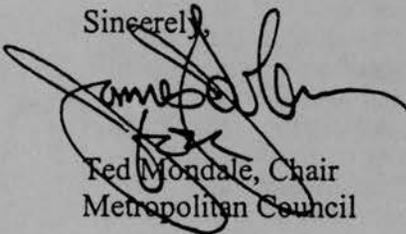
I write to express my support for your innovative inclusionary housing proposal which, at its core, recognizes the need to provide regulatory reform and flexibility to reduce the cost of producing affordable and life-cycle housing and make scarce public subsidies go further. This proposal builds on the voluntary, incentive-based approach to creating affordable and life-cycle housing across the region that has proven so successful with the Livable Communities Act

The proposal to target households with very low incomes for rental and ownership housing will indeed represent a challenge to us all, but one that we should nevertheless embrace.

Finally, a provision of the bill that would permit the Metropolitan Council to waive its service availability charge for very low-income housing is appropriate given the beneficiaries of the inclusionary housing program. I would go further to suggest that the legislature should require a careful look at the state building code and report back to the legislature on potential modifications.

I look forward to working with you on this measure as it moves through the legislature.

Sincerely,



Ted Mondale, Chair
Metropolitan Council