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Star Tribune

NEWSPAPER OF THE TWIN CITIES

Saturday

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50¢

To address the lack of affordable housing

Without a broad approach, efforts can worsen problem

The Star Tribune editorial on Dec. 14 was right in stating that Minneapolis and St. Paul cannot solve the housing problem facing the region by themselves and in pointing out the need to address issues related to concentrated poverty. But we need to be clear that simply dispersing low-income people or removing them from their neighborhoods is not a policy to address either the housing needs of the region or the issues of concentrated poverty.

Under dispersal and removal policies, people are often reconcentrated in new, strange, vulnerable neighborhoods — once again isolated, but this time not just from economic and educational opportunities but also from friends and familiar surroundings.

There has been a growing understanding that focusing on concentrated poverty is an important factor in addressing the serious lack of affordable housing in the Twin Cities region. If one simply builds affordable low-income housing in the most receptive markets, this will likely increase the problems associated with concentrated poverty. Neighborhoods that are economically poor are often beset with many serious social needs and isolated from opportunity.

As communities are gripped in the trap of concentrated poverty, the population diminishes as many of the residents with options leave. Concentrated poverty is defined as when at least 40

percent of the people in a census tract are living below the poverty level. We imposed the consequence of high-poverty neighborhoods on low-income people and especially low-income people of color by limiting their housing choices to places away from things that most of us take for granted, such as good jobs, strong schools and safe neighborhoods.

If concentrated poverty is not addressed, it spreads initially at the urban core, then to the more vulnerable inner-ring suburbs. Even as our region has grown, Minneapolis and St. Paul, and now the older suburbs, have continued to lose population as middle-income people flee the central cities for the developing suburbs.

For example, as of the 1990 Census, 40 percent of middle-class African-Americans lived in the suburbs. Undoubtedly, this percentage has increased since then: Sprawl is one of the main engines of concentrated poverty at the urban core.

Our Institute has worked hard over the last six years to help make the negative effects of concentrated poverty part of the public dialogue. We believe that it is important and appropriate that the media, policymakers and

others have expressed concern about addressing our housing needs in a way that focuses on the problems associated with concentrated poverty.

Unfortunately, some have used the fear of concentrated poverty as an excuse to not take an aggressive stance for addressing our affordable housing needs and in some cases to make low-income citizens the issue and not concentrated poverty. There are others who would ignore the problems associated with concentrated poverty and continue to build affordable housing in the most vulnerable communities; there are others who would stop building, and even destroy, existing affordable housing without any serious effort to replace it.

All of these strategies are wrong. They hurt our fellow citizens, and they hurt our region. We must address the problem on a regional level. We need to make sure that we increase housing availability that also affords meaningful opportunity.

We should consider plans like that adopted by Montgomery County in Maryland, one of the richest counties in the nation, where affordable housing is built in every neighborhood throughout the county. We must also insist that as the region grows,

housing opportunities are considered integral to job and school opportunities. For our central cities and older suburbs, they must not simply push low-income people out, but strive to create mixed-income housing that supports stable neighborhoods and exercise leadership in expanding low-income housing opportunities.

We must be careful not to just focus on where low-income affordable housing exists but look at where there is and will be a need throughout the region. Success must be measured not simply by reducing concentrated poverty in one community while it is increasing in another, but by increasing housing opportunities and supporting stable neighborhoods, while addressing the need to reduce the concentration of poverty and increasing opportunity throughout the region.

We need informed leadership on this issue from our city council members and staff, state legislators, community advocates and our new governor. To do this right will require a change in the way we address the issue of affordable housing, and there will be some costs involved. But it will be a small price to pay compared with doing the wrong things or nothing at all.

— John Powell, Minneapolis. Executive director of the Institute on Race & Poverty, and chair of the Minneapolis City Council Affordable Housing Task Force.

Thursday
FEBRUARY 18, 1999

Metro/State

StarTribune

St. Paul council gets public input on housing plan

By Kevin Duchscher
Star Tribune Staff Writer

Robert Taylor, who lists his address as a homeless drop-in center in downtown St. Paul, went before the City Council Wednesday to garner support for more affordable housing. But his reaction to the grand art deco council chambers spoke louder than his words.

"Just think about how many people are sleeping in doorways, and if they knew this was here. . . . This is a beautiful building. This is really nice. Man! Beautiful carpet. Just look at this," he said, gesturing about him.

Then Taylor made his point: "You know we need housing. That's all I've got to say."

Others had plenty to say Wednesday about St. Paul's proposed housing plan for the first decade of the next century, calling it a good first step but recommending a series of changes to ensure that low-income people aren't shut out of adequate, affordable housing.

The plan sets forth three general policies for city leaders to follow in developing housing through 2010: maintaining St. Paul's current 117,000 housing units, building 300 to 400 smaller units each year and providing more housing for low-income residents.

"Like the classic three-legged stool, none of these three is disposable. No two of the three make any sense without the other," said Nancy Homans of the Planning and Economic Development Department, who outlined the proposals.

But it was the affordable-housing item

that drew the most attention. Recent demolition of affordable apartment buildings, along with the threatened razing of a low-income downtown complex to make room for the St. Paul Companies expansion, have galvanized community advocates to press for more affordable housing.

Among their recommendations Wednesday: substantially raising the number of affordable units built each year and replacing every bedroom in every unit that is demolished.

"I don't think one-to-one replacement is unrealistic, but that's going to be a challenge," said Council Member Jerry Blakey, who added that he agreed with the idea.

Problem not disputed

The Metropolitan Council requires St. Paul to develop a new housing plan every 10 years, as part of long-term urban strategies to guide policymakers. The council is scheduled to vote on the plan March 24.

No one disputes that more housing is needed in St. Paul, where the vacancy rate is dangerously low. Young couples and empty-nesters have trouble finding adequate housing in their price ranges, and low-income residents have been forced to pay more for units that are often unsafe and poorly managed.

The latest figures show that about 7,700 St. Paul households with incomes below 30 percent of the regional median spend more than half of their incomes on rent. The problem is particularly grave downtown, where a recent survey by the CapitolRiver Council showed that less than 1 percent of 3,700 apartments and

condominiums were vacant.

Mayor Norm Coleman, who has put housing near the top of his policy agenda, wants a greater variety of housing for all income levels in St. Paul and more affordable options in the suburbs. Chief of Staff Susan Kimberly said that Coleman generally likes the plan, although he wants to underscore the city's commitment to working with the state Housing Finance Agency and the Family Housing Fund to finance low-income housing in the suburbs.

"We believe that everybody ought to have housing choices, regardless of income. That means people who want to live in the suburbs and can't afford to do so," Kimberly said.

More are homeless

The council heard from speakers representing a coalition of advocacy groups, including the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), the Community Stabilization Project (CSP), Jewish Community Action, the Rondo Community Land Trust, the St. Paul Area Coalition for the Homeless and the St. Paul Tenants Union.

The plan proposes setting aside 10 percent of new housing for residents making 50 percent of the regional median income, and 10 percent for households with incomes below 80 percent of the median. Housing advocates instead asked that St. Paul target 25 percent of new units for households earning minimum wage, and 50 percent for households earning 30 percent of the regional median.

Charlie Mae Hollins, president of the

Tenants Union, said rents are rising 18 percent each year while incomes are advancing a mere 2 to 4 percent. "The lack of affordable housing is making people homeless," she said.

Stuart Goldbarb of Jewish Community Action said another reason for more homeless people is that demolished housing units are not being replaced. "That's forcing more and more people to live under bridges, in dumpsters and refrigerator boxes," he said, adding that new units must have the same number of bedrooms.

Other recommended changes in the plan include a moratorium on demolition of rental housing until the rental vacancy rate moves past 5 percent, delaying demolitions until comparable units are available to evicted tenants and opening Section 8 vouchers for use as mortgage payments.

Lawrence Winans, executive director of the Minnesota Fair Housing Center, said the plan also should address the issue of discrimination in housing. St. Paul recently received a "D" grade from a task force evaluating fair housing practices. "While affordability remains the single greatest impediment to white and enabled households in accessing housing, discrimination is an additional impediment to those of color, the disabled and . . . families with children," he said.

Regardless of what happens, housing advocates consider the debate itself something of a victory. "We're very happy to see that, after seven years of screaming, we're all in agreement that we have a crisis," said CSP director Caty Royce.

Community Circle grapples with issues like housing, race

Richfield discussion group winds up weeks of meetings.

By Mike Westholder
Sun Newspapers

Racial diversity, housing and education were some of the issues a Richfield community circle group grappled with during the last several weeks.

Made up of Richfield and Minneapolis residents the community circle was one of several groups that gathered throughout the Twin Cities as part of "Conversations at the Crossroads." In Richfield, the conversations were sponsored by the city's Human Rights Commission and the Education and Housing Equity Project (EHEP), a non-profit organization with headquarters at Augsburg College, said Connie McDonald, a member of the Richfield Human Rights Commission.

"The purpose was to engage people in conversation to find community-based solutions for potential problems," McDonald said. "Did we find solutions — well no. But we did come up with a lot of ideas."

The Richfield group included a diverse group with an average of eight people attending on a given week, McDonald said.

'Diversity is making Richfield a very powerful place.'

Odell Brown, member of the Human Rights Commission

The circle's final meeting was March 23.

Participants didn't always agree and some discussions were heated, said Odell Brown, a participant and member of the Human Rights Commission, but everyone had at least one thing in common.

"Everybody left Tuesday night with one thought: 'When can we do this again,'" said Brown.

Brown said the experience was exciting and it gave him hope and encouragement for the future.

"Diversity is making Richfield a very powerful place," he said.

The community circle provided an opportunity to do something that isn't done enough, Brown said, talk with one another.

It was a chance to express one's self on a variety of issues and communicate in a meaningful way, Brown said. It was in-

teresting to hear that other people had many of the same feelings and concerns, he added.

One thing the five weeks of discussions made clear is that all members of the Richfield community need to keep the lines of communication open, Brown said. There was a commitment by all parties to continue the dialogue and move forward, he said.

"Everybody has something to say but no way to say it," Brown said.

The metro-wide community discussion groups were organized by the EHEP, whose mission is to promote public dialogue about school segregation, housing inequity and other community issues, McDonald said.

"One of our main focuses was on affordable housing," McDonald said.

There is a severe shortage of housing in the Twin Cities, McDonald said, not only for couples but also for single parents. It's difficult for many people to find housing that accepts children and is affordable, especially when a parent has to pay for child care, she added.

One of the ideas generated by the circle was to contact legislators to promote more state-subsidized housing for low-income families, McDonald said.

There are programs and assistance for families trying to buy a home as well which many people could benefit from, McDonald said. The problem is that many of the potential beneficiaries don't know about the options available to them, she said.

Finding ways to educate and inform people about these programs is another idea the group discussed, McDonald said.

Another topic the group concentrated on was promoting a sense of community in Richfield for all residents, McDonald said. One way of doing that could be encouraging minority parents to participate more in their children's schools.

"One of the biggest things was the idea of tapping into a lot of different cultures," she said.

For example, parents whose primary language is not English could participate in classes by sharing their first language with students. This would get parents involved in their children's schools and teach children about other languages, McDonald said.

"It would be a good way for parents to get involved and help them feel a little more comfortable and promote a sense of

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OPINION

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Clerical employees are without contract

To the editor:

We are Richfield residents and dedicated Richfield public schools' employees.

We have had or currently have children in the Richfield school system and have volunteered many hours to support the schools' various activities and help provide the quality of education of which we are proud.

As members of the clerical unit of Local 284, we have been working without a contract since July 1, 1998. The negotiations have stalled with our request of an increase in our wages.

For the past several contracts, we have always been sympathetic to the Districts' claims of "no money" and have accepted less than cost of living

percent increase in the substitute teacher rate of pay (School board minutes, March 1, 1999), both of which are higher than our request.

It is our hope by bringing these facts to the public's attention, people will become aware of some of the inequities being practiced within the public school district.

**Gladys Denesen
Muriel Olson
Members Clerical Unit
Local 284**

Editor's note: Eleven other Richfield residents who are members of the Clerical Unit Local 284 signed this letter as well.

Food service workers important

To the editor:

compliments.

The reserve teachers in Richfield received an increase in pay of \$20 a day; that amounts to \$2.50 a hour increase based on a eight-hour day. The school board members received a raise of \$25 a meeting. The administrators receive their salaries plus a 2 percent bonus a year.

The custodians, clerical, assistants, and food service workers would love to see a \$2.50 increase, but we are offered far, far less than that for a raise.

Our jobs are important to the children and we take pride in our children and schools.

**Marge Thiele
Kathy Intihar
Karen Sherman
Lynn Guyot
Lora Aldrich**

Classroom assistants seek a fair wage

The increase we have been offered does not represent a fair, livable wage. Annually, the highest rate of pay an assistant can earn falls below the poverty level of federal guidelines.

If you were to research wages and benefit scales of the fast food industry or grocery chains, you would find that they surpass those of classroom assistants.

You already know that a significant number of people have an impact on a student's day. At a glance one might see only teachers, but imagine how difficult a school day would be for students and teachers without competent and dedicated secretaries, cooks, custodians, bus drivers, and classroom assistants. Fair wages would attract and retain these workers.

It is our understanding that certified district employees, substitute teachers and school board members all received

Share your views

The Sun-Current welcomes comments from its readers.

Readers are encouraged to write letters to the editor and guest columns on topics of local interest. Letters to the editor should not exceed 250 words. Short letters are the most likely to be read.

Guest columns may be longer, up to 500 words.

All letters to the editor and guest columns must bear the author's signature and complete address. Telephone numbers (home and office) where the writer can be reached during business and evening hours must be included for verification purposes.

The newspaper re-

Circle

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belonging," McDonald said.

One barrier to the building of community can be seen in many of the city-sponsored programs for youth, Brown said. Very few minority children participate in those programs, he said.

"If you don't have a dialogue, you don't know that's happening," Brown said. "You need to sit down and have a conversation about what's going on."

Then community members can look at ways to better advertise youth activities to the minority families or find other ways to encourage them to take advantage of those opportunities, he said.

In the end, the circle agreed the focus should be on children, communication and housing, Brown said.

"There are ways to solve these problems but you can't by blaming each other and accusing each other," Brown said.

Community circle members also talked about fear, McDonald said. One participant talked about the fact that he was afraid of diversity and what could happen in his neighborhood, she said.

"We found that fear is not just a white thing," McDonald said. "Other races have fears, maybe not the same fear but they are afraid."

For example, some Hispanic people live in fear that they will be deported if they don't have the right papers, she said.

"I believe fear is a major problem," Brown said. "We're all afraid of darkness and what we don't know. We don't see it but we feel it. But there's no reason to fear. ...You have to put a light on these issues so you're not so afraid."

Communicating about these issues and sharing information may be the best way to address these type of issues, she added.

Later this spring, the circles will meet in a series of forums to share their ideas and perhaps develop legislation to introduce to state lawmakers, McDonald said. A Citizen Summit will be conducted in November.

That doesn't mean the issues and discussions will wait until this fall.

"We need to continue doing this," Brown said. "We don't want to wait until November."