

As new housing groups convene, some ask: Is this just more talk?

Groups off to a slow start in assessing and implementing the 2018 recommendations.

By Jessie Van Berkel (<http://www.startribune.com/jessie-van-berkel/280701532/>) Star Tribune |

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State lawmakers formed two new working groups this year to study the lack of affordable housing in Minnesota, an unfolding crisis that was the focus of another housing task force convened by former Gov. Mark Dayton the year before.

Activists and politicians who have long sought state resources to tackle the housing problem say they welcome the renewed attention. But some also are asking what Minnesota will have to show for the hodgepodge of disjointed task forces and commissions.

The majority of the recommendations from Dayton's task force remain unfinished — and the organization that was intended to champion those recommendations recently lost its only staff member.

"How is this any different from the governor's task force on housing?" stalwart housing advocate Rep. Alice Hausman, DFL-St. Paul, asked about the two legislative groups that are supposed to start meeting this summer.

Sen. Rich Draheim, R-Madison Lake, led the first meeting of the Select Committee on Home Ownership Affordability and Availability last week. He said the Dayton-era task force "was a good exercise ... but we didn't do anything," and they need to try new approaches.

He suggested disqualifying cities from getting state aid for affordable housing if they are unwilling to change zoning and density requirements.

The bulk of the meeting focused on presentations from Realtors and homebuilders. The groups raised concerns about local regulatory requirements and high land costs that developers said prevents them from building homes under \$250,000, despite a desperate need for housing in that price range.

Draheim said he expects the Senate committee will help lawmakers identify priorities for when the Legislature reconvenes in February. But he remains uncertain about how his committee's work will dovetail with that of another newly created group, on which he also serves.

Members of that joint legislative commission on housing affordability were supposed to be chosen by June 1, and the commission was to meet by June 15, according to a new law passed in May.

The commission has not yet scheduled its first meeting. Rep. Peter Fischer, DFL-Maplewood, who is convening that meeting, said they probably won't get it on the calendar until September or October. He said delays in the selection of members dragged out the timeline. Senate DFLers did not pick their two appointees until last week.

Fischer said he's not sure what housing issues the joint commission will take up.

"I really just don't know what everybody has on their mind," he said.

One piece of the discussion will be reviewing the unfinished Dayton task force recommendations, Fischer said, adding, "Are we missing anything in the process?"



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The majority of the recommendations from then-Gov. Mark Dayton's task force remain unfinished — and the organization that was

Dayton's task force was made up of 15 members and another 13 who served in an ex officio capacity. It included developers and housing industry experts, local and state government officials, business leaders and affordable housing advocates. After a series of meetings and regional forums across the state, it produced a [72-page report last August](http://www.startribune.com/report-minnesota-needs-thousands-of-new-homes-to-address-affordable-housing-crunch/491411771/) (<http://www.startribune.com/report-minnesota-needs-thousands-of-new-homes-to-address-affordable-housing-crunch/491411771/>) with 30 action steps.

Those included creating a permanently dedicated funding source to invest in affordable homes, cracking down on predatory rental practices, expanding down-payment assistance and creating a public-private partnership that would forecast housing demand and measure progress.

While few of those 30 goals have been met, there were some wins for housing advocates during the past legislative session. Lawmakers added protections for mobile home park residents and authorized \$60 million in bonding dollars for housing — albeit half the amount called for by housing advocates and DFL Gov. Tim Walz.

Last year nonprofits and the McKnight Foundation created an organization called Prosperity's Front Door to push for the recommendations that came out of the Dayton task force. The only staffer, public relations consultant Owen Truesdell, left the organization in June.

A sputtering start

The organization's advocacy work paused after the end of the legislative session, said Warren Hanson, president of the Greater Minnesota Housing Fund. The fund was one of the groups that helped create Prosperity's Front Door.

Hanson said the organization will hire a communications firm to develop a revised action plan that will guide Prosperity's Front Door for the next two or three years. The new consultants will be expected to stay on to help implement it. By the end of this year, Hanson said they will create a scorecard to track the progress of the task force's 30 action steps.

Meanwhile, it has been unclear who took ownership of those task force recommendations, said Libby Murphy, with the Minnesota Housing Partnership.

"It seems like we love to talk about housing, and it gets in the way of action," Murphy said. "So hopefully these committees are not just here to talk more about the issue, and they're actually going to produce results."

If the new Senate committee and joint commission accomplish one thing, it should be creating a dedicated pot of money for housing development, said Acooa Ellis, co-chair of Dayton's task force. She hopes the new groups work on making the task force's detailed plan a reality.

"If their focus is on actually executing on those recommendations, I think it's a great thing," Ellis said. "[That is] something that we lacked for a long time in the housing advocacy community."

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