

Metropolitan Council Interview with Libby Starling, Manager Regional Policy and Research, and Beth Reetz, Director of Community Development Division

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1. Tell us about the Met Council housing plans cities are required to submit. When are the plans of our five cities (Falcon Heights, Lauderdale, Little Canada, Maplewood and Roseville) due?

All plans are due in 2018 and are prepared in 2017. They are on a ten year cycle; the last ones were due in 2008. The Council assists local governments in preparing their plans, including supplying the Met Council's local planning handbook, based on state statute per the Metropolitan Land Planning Act. (Counties also prepare plans; some counties build affordable housing, but Ramsey County doesn't.) Housing plans must contain three elements: 1) assess existing housing and identify needs and priorities; they must identify available land for development or redevelopment; 2) Project affordable housing needs - Cities' data should assume everyone's housing needs are adequately addressed, based on projected growth; and 3) Implement the program through public programs, fiscal devices and specific actions to meet existing and projected needs, e.g., LIHTCs, TIF, or home owners rehab programs targeted at low-income households. Although state statute hasn't changed, the Council has worked to clarify what cities should do, compared to ten years ago, with the goal of increasing transparency for the plans. Cities must ensure that their implementation plans actually tie to their needs. The biggest reason cities don't build enough affordable housing is lack of funding. This is an even bigger reason than the NIMBYs. Federal funding has dried up since the 80s, state funding gets gone and the Met Council only provides a drop in the bucket: 1.5% of what is spent on housing in the seven-county region.

2. What tools does the Council use to enforce these plans?
 - 1) Council plan materials spelling out what cities should do that the public can see (there was nothing for 35 years).
 - 2) If a city plan is not consistent with Council policy, there is nothing they can do. The Council has four systems they are responsible for that are spelled out in state statute – transportation, parks, waste water and aviation – but housing isn't one of them. If it were one of the systems, the Council could ask noncompliant cities to modify their housing plans.
 - 3) The carrot of Livable Community Grants. Cities are only eligible if their housing plans pass muster. Of the 179 local units in the seven-counties, 95 participate. Of our five cities, only Little Canada does not.

3. What criteria do you recommend we use to evaluate the plans?

Alignment of the three plan components is the best way to evaluate, which shows how they interpret and understand their own data and apply it to needs. Is land suggested for housing in reasonable places or is it unrealistic? Is there transportation and shopping or is it in the middle of an industrial area with nothing else in sight? Will the proposed plan really help those who need affordable housing?

4. Are there Metropolitan Council definitions for the various types of affordable housing? We plan to ask each of our cities how many housing units they have of each type and would like to be able to compare apples to apples.

0 – 30% AMI
31 – 50 % AMI
51 – 80% AMI

Low Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC) can go up to 60%, but MN Housing prefers 50%.

5. Can you provide us with data on how many Section 8 vouchers are used in each of our cities?

Yes, by census tract (6,000 people) and they will provide us a link for our student helpers to use in mapping. (They sent practically by the time we got home from the interview.)

6. Can you provide us with data on how many Bridges vouchers are used in each of our cities?

Yes, same as #5.

7. We plan to ask our cities about their participation in and targets/criteria for the Livable Communities Program and Metro HRA and Local Housing Incentives grants. Are there any other Met Council programs we should ask about?

Naturally occurring low-income housing is the largest source of affordable housing and the Council only tracks it in the aggregate per city. They calculate a Housing Performance Score for each city annually, which includes this type of housing, whether it is rental or owner occupied, in addition to the other types we are studying.

You could ask Mary Tingerthal, MN Housing, if cities are doing enough good housing program marketing to ensure their residents are aware of programs available to them. Also, are cities partnering with MN Housing enough? Some programs require the partnership of a city and it isn't even always money from the city, just partnership, which sinks housing efforts.

8. Do you have recommendations about other specific questions we should ask?

- 1) How many times in the last five years did a developer approach your city to build affordable housing? In the last 10 years? What was the outcome?

(For instance, Roseville just turned down a Sherman project in Twin Lakes, but did Sienna Green that is all low-income housing, with Aeon. Falcon Heights has Town Center at Larpenteur and Snelling that is mixed use. Maplewood did a Sherman project. Little Canada and Lauderdale haven't done projects.)

- 2) What are you doing to preserve and protect mobile home parks? How many do you have and where are they located?
 - 3) Are you talking about affordable housing in your community when there isn't a developer knocking on your door? Describe when and how.
 - 4) When a developer comes knocking who wants to do a high-cost building, do you ever ask what it would take to include five or so affordable units?
9. Is the Mobility Counseling Program, listed on your website as slated to be launched in 2015, up and running and if so how is it working?

Yes, it's launched with two counselors hired to each work with 45 families with young children.