

Suburbs don't get fair shake in housing debate, study says new report challenges critics' data

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Byron Orfield's assault on affluent suburbia has been met with a stinging and detailed rebuttal by 12 suburbs, whose new study says many of the legislator's charges are based on faulty data and exclude key information.

The study by the Municipal Legislative Commission, the lobbying arm for a string of suburbs extending from Maplewood to Minnetonka, paints a far more sympathetic picture of the problems faced by suburbs as they try to build more affordable housing for those with low and moderate incomes. In one of its central findings, the study says high land costs in the suburbs, not restrictive zoning allegedly designed to keep out the poor, are the biggest reason affordable housing is difficult to build. The study said that during the 1980s, suburbs in the Twin Cities area "created subsidized housing in record numbers" by building about 4,500 low- and moderate-income rental units.

"They're not the bad guys they're portrayed to be," said Robert Renner Jr., the commission's lobbyist. "We decided we were tired of hearing all kinds of criticism."

While Orfield is not mentioned by name, the study clearly takes aim at the Minneapolis DFLer, who has championed the cause for easing the concentration of the poor in Minneapolis and St. Paul and prodding suburbs to build more low- and moderate-income housing.

And Orfield, who outlined yet another legislative initiative Wednesday for balancing the disparity between city and suburb, was quick to criticize the study.

"I think this is a bunch of baloney," he said.

Orfield said that while many suburbs are willing to bus workers from Minneapolis and St. Paul to new assembly-type jobs in their cities, the workers are not being given the opportunity to live in the suburbs.

"They're good enough {only} to shine their shoes," he said of the disparity.

But the study took particular exception to "several examples of questionable data" being used in the debate, a not-so-veiled reference to Orfield and the many charts he has used to support his arguments.

In one case, the study said, charts showing the number of school-age children in Eden Prairie getting free and reduced-price lunches - a measure of the level of poverty in the city - ignored the fact that a much higher percentage were eligible for the lunches.

By doing so, the study said, the charts underrepresented the number of low- and moderate-income people in Eden Prairie.

Orfield said the flawed-data charges are inaccurate.

"They're just not serious about {affordable housing}," he said. Orfield said the study, which he said he has not seen, seems to take the myopic view that "everything's fine out there."

The study, meanwhile, insists that many of the Municipal Legislative Commission's member cities do have affordable housing - that is, single-family housing in the \$60,000 to \$110,000 price range.

In a survey of nine of the commission's 12 member cities, the study found, 48 percent of all homesteaded property was assessed at \$110,000 or less and could qualify for the FHA first-time home buyer program.

Even Plymouth, one of the priciest suburbs, has nearly a third of its single-family homesteads valued at \$110,000 or less, the study said.

Nine of the suburbs, it added, have 40,000 single-family homes valued from \$60,000 to \$110,000.

The study also said the debate has been clouded by "a simplistic view" of how to define low- and moderate-income people. It said there are huge differences in education level, job training and even automobile ownership between someone earning 80 percent of the Twin Cities median income and another earning just 30 percent of the median. Yet both people, the study said, are too often lumped together in the

same low- and moderate-income category.

Similarly, the study said, many of the jobs created in the suburbs are in the electronic, electric equipment, printing and publishing industries and often require higher educational skills than were needed for the manufacturing jobs that were lost in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

“It’s a far more complex issue,” said Plymouth Mayor Joy Tierney, the commission’s chairwoman. She said, “you just can’t take a low-income {person} and put them in some apartment” in the suburbs. The study, she said, was meant to be “an intelligent response” to those who criticized the suburbs.

The commission’s members were stung last year by charges that some suburbs, through zoning that requires large lot sizes, made affordable housing unbuildable. That allegation received plenty of attention in the study.

It said critics have largely ignored the price of land in the suburbs, which it said accounts for as much as 50 percent of the total cost of a new home in the Twin Cities area.

In fact, citing a 1989 national analysis of land costs, it said the Twin Cities area had the lowest concentration of zoning power among the 45 largest metro areas in the nation.

“It appeared this issue started out with a conclusion and there was a bunch of data collected to support the conclusion,” Renner said.

Orfield’s data wasn’t necessarily incorrect, he said, but “it’s just how you present it . . . to get the result you want.”

Affordable housing in the suburbs: A new look at how much there is

In a new study, eight Twin Cities suburbs say they have more affordable housing than critics claim and that high land costs in the suburbs, as opposed to restrictive zoning, are keeping more such housing from being built.