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## Communities consider options for affordable housing

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A group of North Shore mayors hopes to enlist corporate assistance to expand work force housing in their towns -- and drum up community support along the way.

Highland Park Mayor Michael Belsky, Deerfield Mayor Harriet Rosenthal and Northbrook Village President Sandy Frum met last month to consult with affordability advocates from the Metropolitan Planning Council and other agencies.

The discussion focused on employer-assisted housing strategies -- a term in community development circles that refers to major local businesses donating cash, land or other assets to offset home prices for qualified buyers.

Federal grants and tax credits offer an incentive for those businesses to climb aboard, but some elected leaders say they have a ways to go before their communities sign on with any agreements.

"I'm really telling you, we're starting from scratch" in discussing affordability issues in Northbrook, Frum told officials from Deerfield and Highland Park during a May 30 meeting at Deerfield Village Hall. Representatives from Lake Forest and Highwood were also invited to the meeting but did not attend.

The talks are taking place as a nonprofit affordable housing agency, Highland Park Illinois Community Land Trust, makes a move to go regional while inviting other North Shore communities to join.

Proponents say the revamped agency could offer a vehicle to bring together privately subsidized homes and local workers priced out of the North Shore real estate market.

Studies show that just 13 percent of the housing stock in Deerfield, Highland Park, Highwood, Lake Forest and Northbrook is priced affordably to workers earning less than \$50,000 per year-- a group that accounts for 69 percent of the local community work force.

"Ultimately, all these communities are pretty high-cost areas. And I think they all are understanding affordable housing is really important for a community's economic diversity, providing work force housing, and to help meet the state of Illinois Affordable Housing Planning and Appeal Act," explained Rob Anthony, executive director of the land trust, recently renamed Community Partners for Affordable Housing. "There's a growing understanding that a lack of affordable housing is really a regional problem and can be most efficiently and effectively addressed on a regional level."

Proponents believe local corporations can help with a key first step. They claim employers can reduce turnover and save on training costs when workers live nearby. By contributing to nonprofit housing agencies, the companies also may earn tax write-offs and could qualify for state and federal government incentives.

As it has done for years in Highland Park, Community Partners for Affordable Housing would use grants and private donations to buy up properties, make repairs and administer sales. The agency sets homes at affordable prices, selling them to qualified buyers with preference toward households earning 80 percent or less than the area's median income. It also keeps the land in trust to ensure homes remain priced affordably and marketed to qualified buyers in the future.

"We're trying to address the region's mismatch between jobs and housing," said Robin Snyderman, vice president of community development for Metropolitan Planning Council, which is encouraging affordable housing policies in the northern suburbs. "The employer-assisted housing strategy is one excellent tool that makes all of this a lot easier."

Outside Highland Park, some community leaders see promise in the model that uses grants, corporate

donations and nonprofits to maintain and expand affordable housing.

But local public funding appears to be a non-starter.

"I think our board would be ready to move forward if we don't have to fund it with taxpayer dollars -- and I think that's key," Rosenthal said of the Deerfield Village Board, which has briefly discussed the possibility of a work force housing plan.

Frum said it will take time for Northbrook to understand the various concepts and funding models behind work force housing, while overcoming "the fear factor" at the same time.

"There has been a feeling among employers for years that there is a need for this," she said, but added that there is almost no public or official recognition of the issue. "We're in the midst of a comprehensive plan and affordable housing is missing."

Frum said she would broach the subject with Northbrook staff and the Village Board, but could not promise results by the end of summer, when some leaders hope to solidify a regional partnership.

Snyderman said the Metropolitan Planning Council can present information to local councils and residents, but noted that the clock is ticking on some of the available grant money.

"Right now, there are dollars on the table that we don't want to leave. So we have to fast-forward some of this education," she said. "The goal is to know upfront if we have a shot at some of these grants in 2011."

Organizers agreed the regional approach would have to give communities local control to shape policies as they see fit.

"This would be different politically and would require some leadership," Belsky said, comparing the familiar municipal model to a new, regional approach.

But the benefits would reach across town borders, Belsky added. "Anytime something happens, it's a win for all of us."

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