Less costly housing needed

To the editor:

As Minnesota's economy grows stronger, working Minnesotans often lack the housing options they need.

Based on my work with the Southeastern Minnesota Multi-County Housing Authority (SEMMCHRA), unfortunately it comes as little surprise to me that a quarter of owners and 57 percent of renters in Wabasha County spend more on their housing than they can afford, given their incomes.

All throughout our service area, low rental vacancy rates are contributing to the problem. In some areas vacancy rates are as low as 1 percent. However, it has become difficult, if not impossible, to develop new rental housing to ease shortages in most of the places we serve.

The impact on people's lives is unmistakable. One extended family in Plainview had moved to the area for a better life. Several of the family's adults found work in a canning factory. But now over a dozen family members live in a single mobile home for lack of better options. Without openings in our agency's affordable housing programs, we could offer only clothing and other resources inadequate for solving their housing problem.

In other cases, workers must travel far distances to work, sacrificing valuable time with family, when they cannot find housing near their workplaces.

The incremental commuting costs positions the family with even less disposable income for covering basic needs.

Gov. Mark Dayton and his Housing Finance Commissioner, Mary Tingerthal, recognize the challenges facing Southeast Minnesota. To their credit, they have proposed adding $10 million in state funding to the Governor's Housing and Jobs Growth Initiative.

We also encourage our state legislators to consider the proposed $39 million "Homes for All" legislative agenda for strategic investments in housing and services.

Increased flexibility in existing financing options is another tool that would help support creating more needed housing.

Southeast Minnesota and other Greater Minnesota communities are well aware that ensuring that employees can live in decent homes within their budgets is key to our economic vitality. Ensuring that tools are available to create and preserve quality, affordable housing for all, and at the same time, help to recruit and maintain a strong workforce and quality of life is critical to the successes of our region.

Joe Wheeler
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