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**Workforce housing solutions making their way through Capitol**

*By WisPolitics.com*

Both sides of Wisconsin’s political aisle are circulating legislation to increase affordable housing as a way to tackle workforce issues.

Statewide housing supply is at historic lows. Median home prices continue to rise and apartment rent increases are outpacing wage growth. The situation is spurring possible fixes from Democratic Gov. Tony Evers and GOP lawmakers.

Median home prices surged in March as housing supply continues to shrink compared to last year, according to the Wisconsin Realtors Association’s most recent monthly analysis. Total listings of homes for sale fell about 37 percent over the last year, pushing median prices up over 10 percent to nearly $230,000 over that same period.

Wisconsin employers are struggling to recruit workers unless the surrounding area has attractive and affordable housing options, according to a brief from the WRA.

“Unless this workforce housing problem is fixed, Wisconsin will be unable to keep and attract the skilled workers necessary for our economy to thrive,” the WRA wrote.

GOP Rep. Rob Summerfield said houses are selling within 24 hours in the small, northwestern city of Bloomer where he’s from. Housing has been an issue there, he said.

Summerfield authored Assembly Bill 156, which would create a 4 percent state tax credit for the development of new rental housing for people within 61 to 100 percent of an area’s median income. It would also provide a 10-year restrictive covenant to be recorded on the rental housing units to ensure they remain affordable.

He said employers in the region are expanding, but they need help getting workers to move to the rural area.

“But to get people to move up, there’s no housing stock. There’s nothing. And the price range is really low — the real fixer-uppers — or the really high-end,” Summerfield said. “So we’re trying to encourage the middle ground for families and people to move to the area.”

The bill is in the Assembly Committee on Ways and Means. Its sister bill, SB 172, has been referred to the Senate Committee on Financial Institutions and Revenue. Summerfield said he’s hopeful the respective committee chairs will take them up soon.

Meanwhile, Senate Majority Leader Devin LeMahieu, R-Oostburg, recently highlighted workforce housing as one of two problems facing the state’s business community. The Senate Committee on Housing, Commerce and Trade has a hearing on the topic on Wednesday at 11 a.m.

“I think it’s a dual problem: it’s having the workforce available, making sure they’re willing to work but then also, when you attract people into your area, making sure that they can actually find a house or find a rental unit to move in,” he told a recent WisPolitics.com luncheon.

LeMahieu voiced support for streamlining regulations on building homes and affordable housing.

Summerfield said his bill is just “one piece out of many” that could help with the workforce housing crisis facing the state.

Evers is also addressing the problem in his latest budget plan, which the Joint Finance Committee is reviewing. Evers’ initiatives are aimed at increasing the supply of workforce housing.

The governor is calling for increasing the percentage of housing allowed in a mixed-use tax incremental district from 35 percent to 60 percent. The extra 25 percent has to be workforce housing.

His plan would also increase funding from $42 million to $100 million for the Wisconsin Housing & Economic Development Authority’s state housing tax credit program and give $50 million for local housing development funds.

“We’re going to see what Joint Finance does,” Summerfield said of the governor’s proposals. “Because I think the more and more discussion we have, and more and more ideas out there, hopefully, we can get some progress made on this workforce housing.”

Rep. Amy Loudenbeck, R-Clinton, is a co-sponsor of the workforce housing legislation and serves on the Joint Finance Committee. She said she has not had any discussions with Joint Finance Committee members about workforce housing.

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