

LOCAL

Suburbs opt to go their own way on state's 'drop home' law

Facing a new state requirement to allow tiny trailers on residential lots, many cities are saying no.

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Metro suburbs are bypassing a new state law that would require them to allow tiny, portable houses on residential properties, saying the state mandate doesn't work for them.

The statute is intended to provide access to temporary "drop homes" for people — mostly older adults — with health care needs that require them to be close to a caregiver.

But worries about resident complaints, conflicts with local zoning ordinances and timing concerns have spurred cities to opt out of the law. Some say they already have the resources they need to meet the needs of aging residents, while others want to pass their own laws allowing temporary structures tailored to their city.

The League of Minnesota Cities fought for an opt-out provision in the statute so local governments could still have control over their own zoning.

Bill sponsor Rep. Roz Peterson, R-Lakeville, struggled to find a place for her elderly father to live when he got sick two years ago. It's disappointing that cities are opting out, she said, but she acknowledged that the law isn't one-size-fits-all.

"It's always difficult to accept change and innovation," Peterson said. "This won't solve everybody's problem — this is one tool in the toolbox, so to speak."

Drop homes, sometimes called granny pods, are trailers under 300 square feet that are billed as an affordable and temporary alternative to sending sick, injured or elderly family members to a nursing home.

The new law was based on similar, but less restrictive, laws in North Carolina and Virginia.

In Minnesota, the law allows homeowners to have a drop home on their property for six months by paying for a \$100 permit, unless their city has a specific ordinance against the homes.

The Burnsville City Council voted unanimously on June 21 to opt out. Drop homes don't meet city codes, said Mayor Elizabeth Kautz, and the city already has temporary housing options.

Those options include spare bedrooms, apartments, assisted living facilities, short-term health care facilities, hotels and group homes, according to a meeting agenda report.

"It's not that we don't have it," Kautz said. "We want control of what happens here in Burnsville."

Some cities want to allow accessory dwelling units but are choosing to do so on their own terms.

The Crystal City Council will likely vote to opt out at its next meeting, said Council Member Jeff Kolb. The decision stems largely from the nature of residential properties in Crystal, many of which may be too small to qualify for drop homes under the statute, he said.

The City Council will try to pass an ordinance in the future that allows for accessory units that are better tailored to the city, Kolb said.

"There was a concern that it would be perceived that by opting out, we were saying we don't want this kind of thing around here, that it was kind of a cold-hearted decision," he said. "The reality is it's not that at all."

In Lakeville, the City Council agreed to opt out last week but also sent the issue to city staff for further review.



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ELIZABETH FLORES, STAR TRIBUNE

John Louiselle, left, and Jesse Lammi are a pair of young New Brighton entrepreneurs that have started NextDoor Housing, a company

There were multiple concerns, said Mayor Matt Little, including aesthetics, property values and the difficulty city staff would face in having to make judgments about residents' illnesses.

"Every single city in this country is going to need to figure out a way to start taking care of our seniors," Little said. "There's just a lot of issues we need to ... make fair and clear."

Meanwhile, city staff in Woodbury are recommending that city officials vote to opt out in order to have more time to figure out what local needs are, said Jason Egerstrom, Woodbury's spokesman.

Under the statute, cities have until Sept. 1 to opt out.

John Louiselle, co-owner of NextDoor Housing, a New Brighton-based drop home company that helped craft the law, said he doesn't mind if cities choose a different direction. "What's worrisome to us is when we see cities opting out and offering no alternative solution," he said.

Peterson said she would like to see cities try out the statute and see how it works. The biggest challenge, she said, is that people aren't familiar with the drop home idea.

"This is new — nobody's really done this before," she said. "Let's have a conversation with the community before we just choose to abandon the idea."

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