

## **Statement from Councilmember Matt Privratsky about changes to the Student Overlay**

I've heard from several neighbors in the neighborhood surrounding the University of St Thomas that they are concerned about new six-unit housing development — particularly where these six-unit properties are being developed next to each other or in “clusters” along the same block or area. Since taking this interim role just over a month ago, I've had conversations with Union Park District Council (UPDC) staff, the West Summit Neighborhood Advisory Committee (WSNAC), and individual neighbors themselves who live near these properties. And I've also had numerous meetings and communications with relevant city staff to ensure I'm fully appreciating the issue at hand. I'll continue to have those conversations and work on this issue but I wanted to share some updates so folks can get a sense for how this is being worked.

First, I'll say that any change like this can be a real adjustment for those living closest to it. Even as someone who strongly supports more density in our land use and more multifamily housing like the six-unit buildings being built in this area, I understand that living next to a six-unit building is not the same as living next to a single family house. At the very least, there are now more neighbors and people and the activity that may come with them.

Next, let's make sure we appreciate which ordinances and city rulers are in play here. On one hand, some neighbors are requesting a change to the student housing overlay rules (which currently requires 1-2 unit rental properties which happen to house students to be spaced out) to include 3-6 unit properties. All advice I've received from legal and policy experts in city hall — in addition to my own professional policy read — about the student housing overlay is that it is likely either unconstitutional or, in the very least, not good public policy. So, to be clear, I am not personally or professionally comfortable re-affirming the city's role in regulating how residents live in our neighborhoods based solely on whether they are enrolled in or accepted into an undergraduate or trade program.

But, I am still very open to common sense tweaks or improvements to our recent 1-6 unit zoning changes to ensure the new rules are both encouraging new homes for our neighbors while also acknowledging neighborhood concerns and responding to them. Issues such as tree replacement, ensuring water runoff is handled properly, and other basic land use questions are all fair to raise for any development and certainly are fair to raise here. I'm currently working with Planning and Economic Development (PED) staff to gauge their comfort level on any of those kinds of changes — both within this ordinance language itself or via city wide ordinance changes that could then buffer the 1-6 unit language. In addition, I'll be checking in with our Department of Safety and Inspections (DSI) to reaffirm and reassess the way student housing properties are being inspected and managed through our Certificate of Occupancy (C of O) process, whether our current C of O fees adequately fund their desired goals, and how best to work with existing and future landlords to ensure they are doing their part to have their properties meet city code and expectations.

Finally, I want to give some context on how this issue is felt from a city wide perspective. The area surrounding St Thomas has a uniquely high demand for existing and new housing and, as such, has seen fairly consistent development even while building permits and construction have fallen across Saint Paul. That means it can feel, to neighbors close to St Thomas, that city wide narratives around a “housing shortage” or need for more housing can seem either exaggerated or downright false. But the truth is the need for more housing at all affordability levels continues

to be high — it just so happens that one of the very few places where development slowed down least, or not at all, is this particular area. From a citywide perspective, the new housing is still desperately needed. So too is any increase and strengthening of our property tax base. At a time when downtown office building values have plummeted and there is eminent uncertainty around the West Rock site and other major sites, new developments like these 6 unit apartment buildings are some of the rare examples of dramatically increasing the property tax value of a given lot and reducing property tax burden on others. None of these citywide dynamics erase the thoughts and concerns of nearby neighbors, but they do impact the way city wide zoning changes need to be contemplated and analyzed.

Please don't hesitate to reach out with your feedback and suggestions as we continue to meet with our internal staff and members of the community.