

**NINA MOINI:** This afternoon, state lawmakers will discuss the latest attempt to get more homes built in Minnesota by limiting local zoning rules. Supporters say those rules block development, making it harder for people to find homes they can afford. This is the third year in a row that a group of housing advocates and Republican and DFL lawmakers tried to loosen zoning restrictions from the State Capitol. The previous bills failed with opposition from local government leaders. This year's version includes some compromises.

One group that fought previous bills is the League of Minnesota Cities, which is now taking a softer stance. Joining me to explain the shift is League of Minnesota Cities lobbyist Daniel Lightfoot. Thanks for your time, Daniel.

**DANIEL** Hi, Nina. Good to be with you.

**LIGHTFOOT:**

**NINA MOINI:** Well, I would love it if you would start by just laying out what zoning is. Sometimes it can be an overlooked area, but it's so crucial and critical. Can you explain how it works at the city level?

**DANIEL** Yeah, sure, Nina, and it's a great question. Zoning at its core is the mechanism in which cities and local units of government identify areas of land in a community as to what goes where whether it's a housing development, a commercial building including the infrastructure needed to support that development, identifying how land is guided for a particular use.

**NINA MOINI:** I'm sure there isn't a city that you work with that is not asking for more housing and solutions and how can we make this happen in the state of Minnesota, but it sounds like your group is not supporting this year's bill, which did have some I guess compromises if you would call it that in there. What is this about at the core? Is this about the idea of states preempting local decision making?

**DANIEL** Yeah, Nina. At its core, the bill requires cities to allow more housing types like duplexes and townhomes in certain areas. It also requires multifamily housing in some commercial districts and limits certain zoning and design standards. That said, the discussion over the past several sessions is how state policy should dictate what cities can do in terms of planning and where housing development goes in their individual communities.

Authors and advocates have identified this as a way to increase housing supply by requiring cities to allow more housing types in those areas, and that's been a major focus at the Capitol. And it directly affects how cities plan for growth and development.

**NINA MOINI:** And I should mention we wanted to have Representative Spencer Igo, one of the sponsors, on today, but he got busy and wasn't able to join us. But we know our incredible politics team is going to be following this from start to finish like they do every year.

So some of the examples here of these I guess compromises that came after lobbying from folks like yourself is requiring cities to allow multi-housing duplexes on a third of their residential land instead of all of it. So there's a scaling back of the scaling back I guess going on there. I guess I'm hearing you say that these are compromises, but at the end of the day, it sounds like you don't want any interference from state lawmakers in terms of cities in this area, or what do you think is an appropriate relationship? Can it ever be helpful to make sure that there is some consistency across the state?

**DANIEL** Thanks, Nina. So to be clear, the League of Minnesota Cities does not support legislation that directly preempts city authority or limits local decision making. That said, our change in advocacy posture to neither lobby votes for nor against the bill is the outcome of more than two years of good faith negotiation, resulting in the authors addressing many but not all of our concerns and modifying the legislation to remove or change some of the most problematic provisions for cities.

**NINA MOINI:** What are a couple of those most problematic provisions that you would still like to see lawmakers address?

**DANIEL** Well, earlier proposals were much more sweeping as you mentioned. They applied statewide forced density everywhere and didn't account for infrastructure. And because cities stayed engaged, the current bill is more targeted and gives cities some additional flexibility as to where housing is located and better reflects how cities can operate. In talking with cities and some of our affiliate groups as we went through negotiations that got us to this point, it is obvious that there are other provisions that still could be included in this bill that cities would hope to see, in general the size of cities that are impacted by various segments of the bill, the amount of time cities will have to comply with the requirements in the bill, what is required of cities in the legislation, and what is left up to cities to decide what works best for them. And those are the topics that we expect will be discussed as the legislation continues to be debated by the legislature.

**NINA MOINI:** So in the past were definitely against, and now it sounds like you are saying you're going to take a neutral stance and just see what happens over time?

**DANIEL** I would identify the league's position as continually concerned with legislation that directly limits city authority.

**LIGHTFOOT:** That said, our change in posture is a result of more than two years of negotiations with those authors, and because we've stayed involved and engaged, the legislation has reflected more of the city input.

It's important to remember that no one city is alike, and it's important that this legislation identifies both scalability considerations as to what types of requirements are applied to what size and type of city and introduce back into this conversation more ability for cities to make decisions on what to deploy locally with local decision making.

**NINA MOINI:** So today there are Senate and House versions of the bill as there are. The House version is getting that hearing coming up at 1:00 today. What are you going to be watching for?

**DANIEL** That's a great question, Nina. And, of course, the policy process at the Capitol is lengthy, and this bill will continue to get considerations in both House and Senate committees as well as continued discussion with the legislature as a whole. We're going to continue to be working with authors of the bill and advocates to make sure that as the bill advances the city perspective remains a big part of this conversation and ensuring that the conversation continues as to if the bill changes in any way, making sure that those changes are beneficial to local units of government in terms of how they will ultimately be implementing this legislation if the bill ends up passing the House and Senate and is signed into law.

**NINA MOINI:** And we know that there's a really close and evenly divided legislature this year, but it does seem like there's bipartisan support from the lawmakers who have brought this forward year after year to try and get these zoning changes on the books. Are you concerned at all that if nothing passes this year that there might be an even more difficult situation from your perspective in sessions to come?

**DANIEL LIGHTFOOT:** Yeah, Nina, it's one of those interesting issues that doesn't break evenly along party lines, and we have seen this type of legislation get more and more bipartisan support year over year. And I think as we continue to work on this issue, the league as we have been will continue to be a part of the process and ensure that the city perspective is heard. If this legislation moves forward this session or if this legislation moves forward next session or sessions after that, it's important that we have been and will continue to be a part of the policymaking process because this stuff is complex.

**NINA MOINI:** All right, Daniel, thanks very much for your time. I appreciate it.

**DANIEL LIGHTFOOT:** I appreciate it, Nina. Take care.

**DANIEL LIGHTFOOT:**

**NINA MOINI:** That's the League of Minnesota Cities lobbyist Daniel Lightfoot.