

Mayor: Housing panel to address homeownership



Mayor Malik Evans explains the Housing Quality Task Force's focus on homeownership. CHRISTINA CHKARBOUL/
ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

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Rochester's Housing Quality Task Force will expand its focus to increasing homeownership in the city, Mayor Malik Evans announced at a press conference Wednesday afternoon.

The 21-member group, convened in February 2022 to suggest policies for improving housing quality, will have 60 days to develop strategies to help raise Rochester's homeownership rate, which stands at 37%. The national average is 66%. The task force's developers,

administrators, and community organizers will also look at ways to improve support for existing homeowners.

"Owning a home is one of the most fundamental ways that families build wealth and provides stability for future generations," Evans said. "We look forward to this group delivering some recommendations in the next 60 days that will allow us to leverage the public and private sector and partnerships to make recommendations to the city on how we can help facilitate greater home ownership."

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When Evans put together the task force nearly two-and-a-half years ago, he gave its members 90 days to compile policy suggestions on housing quality and code enforcement. Since then, the city has created a Landlord-Tenant Bill of Rights and Responsibilities, hired more code enforcement inspectors, and launched a digital property database and management portal.

Evans said his administration seeks ways to align its homeownership-focused efforts with county, state, and partner organizations' initiatives.

At the press conference, Rochester Management Manager of Housing Carol Wheeler said that strengthening existing programs that reduce obstacles to homeownership, such as Home Rochester and Buy the Block, will be a priority.

"We have a great foundation of programs and projects to start building more toward homeownership and increasing that percentage," Wheeler said.

The city will also look to the task force for ideas on addressing the ongoing racial disparities in homeownership. Only 28% of Latine and 30% of Black Rochesterians own their homes, according to City Council President Miguel Meléndez. This data follows a trend pervasive across the state: An October 2023 report from the New York Attorney General's office revealed that white households own their homes at nearly double the rate of households of color. The report found that unequal access to affordable credit remains a key barrier to homeownership for people of color.

"All residents, but particularly Black and Brown residents in the city, need access to these types of opportunities to ensure that we're providing the equity in terms of the opportunities to own property in the city of Rochester," Meléndez said at the press conference.

In particular, Meléndez said he'd like the task force to consider expanding the Rochester Land Bank Corporation, which takes back vacant, tax-delinquent, and abandoned properties and sells them to prequalified buyers.

Wheeler said the group's strategies will likely involve existing buildings and new developments, including experimental housing types the city hasn't seen much of, such as co-ops and mutual housing.

Evans said the city will improve access for first-time buyers and expand programs that help existing homeowners repair and renovate their properties.

"We don't only want to increase homeownership, but we also want to make sure that people who currently own their homes can stay in their homes," Evans said. "Part of that is making sure that they can keep their houses up to code."

Rochester recently received over \$4 million state grant as part of the Targeted Home Improvement Program, which should help finance critical repairs for low- and moderate-income homeowners. Evans said efforts to help homeowners keep their properties compliant will ramp up, though an existing city-run initiative that helps fund repairs in owner-occupied properties, the Housing Rehabilitation Program, is not currently available, according to the city website.