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Chip Halbach: Lake Street fire -- A question of safety, affordability

In the aftermath of the deadly Lake Street fire two weeks ago in Minneapolis, the safety of the Twin Cities' rental housing stock has been the focus of attention. Your April 9 article ("Lake Street tenants spotted host of fire hazards") highlighted code violations that would have contributed to the blaze and its human toll. Unfortunately, the problems associated with substandard housing often fly under our radar until tragedy hits to remind us how important safe and decent housing is to each of us.

Some might wonder why people would be willing to live in these clearly unsafe conditions. The same article listed several tenants' occupations: a hotel housekeeper, a bartender, a janitor, a couple of factory workers and a roofer.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the housekeeper and the bartender would not make enough money to pay for an efficiency apartment at fair market rent (\$628) without spending

more than 30 percent of their income on housing, which is the federal standard of affordability.

The janitor could barely afford that rent and only if it included all utilities. None of these three lower-income residents would be able to afford a one-bedroom apartment (fair market rent: \$741). Residents of this building, despite being aware that they were living in potentially dangerous conditions, may have considered the extra space worth the risk.

In the Twin Cities, tens of thousands of people face a similar choice. The code enforcement system will never be perfect. There will be demand for substandard housing at a low price as long as people work in occupations that do not pay a full-time worker enough to afford fair market rents. And as long as there is demand, there will continue to be landlords without scruples willing to trade lower rents for the freedom to ignore problems that most tenants would not tolerate.

Affordable housing developers in the Twin Cities are working to address this

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problem by providing safe and decent housing options. This resource is critical, in addition to federally funded rent subsidies like Section 8, which makes it possible for lower-income Minnesotans to lease a private rental unit and pay only the portion of rent they can afford.

The Legislature this session has slashed millions of dollars from housing investment projects in our area. For people making less than \$29,000 to have a place to live that is decent, safe and affordable, we need funding for housing. Increasing the availability of good housing opportunities is the best way to make sure Minnesotans are not living in dangerous conditions because that is all they can afford.

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