

Student Rental Housing Overlay District Ordinance
St. Paul City Council Public Hearing Testimony
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Good evening. My name is Doug Hennes, and I am vice president for university and government relations at the University of St. Thomas.

As I have stated on numerous occasions over the past year, St. Thomas agrees with individuals who believe there must be a proper balance of owner-occupied housing and rental housing in our neighborhood. We value our presence in an attractive neighborhood with strong housing, a low crime rate and well-maintained streets and parks, and we understand concerns that the neighborhood may be approaching a “tipping point” where there is too much rental housing.

We cannot, however, support the ordinance in front of you tonight because we believe it unfairly singles out St. Thomas.

We realize we are the largest university in St. Paul and have the most commuter students living in a campus neighborhood. But throughout this process, beginning with your public hearing last August on the one-year moratorium, we have urged the city to examine the issue as it affects *all* colleges in St. Paul – not just St. Thomas. Tens of thousands of students are enrolled at eight colleges or universities, including St. Thomas, within five miles of our campus. The issue of what to do about student rental housing should be dealt with on a citywide level – not just at St. Thomas. If a density ordinance is considered good public policy, then it should be applied to neighborhoods surrounding all colleges even if other overlay districts are much smaller.

If the ordinance is adopted, St. Thomas requests that the city reduce the minimum distance between existing student rental housing and any new student rental housing from 150 feet, as the city staff has recommended, to 100 feet.

I have two other observations, both related to on-campus housing at St. Thomas and both discussed earlier this month by the Planning Commission.

The first observation involves the question of additional on-campus housing. Our bottom line is that this is not a short-term solution because we are not in a position to borrow funds for a number of years. We recently reached our debt capacity in constructing three projects valued at \$133 million over the last four years – a student center, an athletics and recreation complex, and a parking ramp.

The second observation is whether St. Thomas should require freshmen and sophomores to live on campus. We vigorously oppose this idea. Only a small number of colleges have such a requirement, which would hurt our recruitment efforts because of the nature of our population. Sixty percent of students come from the Twin Cities area, and they need the flexibility of living on or off campus because of jobs, internships, families and friends. The requirement also would force all juniors and seniors to live off campus, and just as many students would live in the neighborhood.

We realize this is a difficult issue. We have worked long and hard with our West Summit

Neighborhood Advisory Committee, our two community councils and several city departments on programs to address long-standing problems involving students living in neighborhoods, and we are making progress. You have my pledge that those efforts will continue in the months and years ahead.

Thank you.