

Rooming houses 'on our radar': NDP

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Rooming houses have been a problem for decades, their slow decline documented for years. Now, the NDP government has done what it does best: formed a committee.

"We have a lens on rooming houses more than we've had in a number of years," said Housing Minister Kerri Irvin-Ross. "They are very much on our radar." The province has set up a new cross-departmental committee to tackle the problem, said Irvin-Ross.

It's looking at how better to help tenants and what options might be available to bolster potential buyers or spur renovations. That could include offering loan guarantees to landlords willing to buy rooming houses but who can't get mortgages from conventional banks, which deem rooming houses too risky.

Irvin-Ross was less enthusiastic about another idea housing advocates and researchers have proposed -- setting minimum standards for rooming houses governing things such as the minimum square footage per tenant and a proper number of bathrooms.

Irvin-Ross said the city should play the largest role in any such rules, and raised concerns minimum standards could ultimately shrink the number of rooming-house units, which are a critical, if maligned, ingredient in Winnipeg's affordable-housing mix.

The committee may also consider properly counting the number of rooming houses in order to get a handle on the issue.

Rooming houses must register their rents with the Residential Tenancies Branch, but the branch can't count how many have done so. It's widely assumed many rooming houses don't register their rents and fly under the radar.

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