

Rep. Kitchens: Applauds passage of housing bill

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MADISON, Wis. – Rep. Joel Kitchens (R-Sturgeon Bay) is pleased the Wisconsin State Assembly has passed a bill he co-authored that will help rural manufacturers that are having trouble attracting and retaining workers due to inadequate affordable housing.

“Everywhere you go in my district you can see ‘help wanted’ signs,” Rep. Kitchens said. “We have a worker shortage and it is preventing many of our businesses from growing. A lack of affordable housing is playing a significant factor in that shortage – both in my district and in rural areas throughout the state.”

The Door County Economic Development Corp. released a report in 2019 that analyzed the need for workforce housing for employees who earn between 60 and 120 percent of the area median income. The study found that Door County had a structural gap of 470 workforce housing apartment units between 2010 and 2017 and has a future need of an additional 110 units between 2018 and 2023.

Assembly Bill 544 creates a \$10 million pilot program where the Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority (WHEDA) may award grants, loans or loan guarantees to rural communities to encourage the construction of single- and multi-family workforce housing. Eligible projects must be located in a county where more than 25 percent of its residents live in rural areas.

“It was pretty shocking to me when I learned that almost 80 percent of state and federal low-income housing tax credits go to the three most populous counties in Wisconsin,” Rep Kitchens said. “Our state is so much more than just three counties, so we need to be doing all we can to ensure that the rest of us – especially those in our more rural regions – are not being left behind.”

Jim Schuessler, executive director of the Door County Economic Development Corp., believes developers have been reluctant to build in rural areas because of sharp increases in home construction costs, limited financing on new housing and a diminished interest in small-scale projects.

“AB 544 takes a problem-solving approach to addressing the need for workforce apartments and even single-family homes in rural counties such as Door County,” Schuessler said. “Door County has several municipalities that have shovel-ready sites for development and AB 544 creates an opportunity to focus on the gaps that stand in the way of providing workforce housing in our rural communities.”