



Rep. Ruth Cook (D-Wake), chairperson of the Commission to Study the Housing Programs of North Carolina.

Photo by Paul Cooper

# The Housing Study Commission Goes to Work



In 1981, the General Assembly created an 18-member "Commission to Study the Housing Programs in North Carolina" and instructed the group to report to the 1983 legislature. The Commission, chaired by Rep. Ruth Cook (D-Wake), has been meeting throughout 1982, first hearing from experts in all aspects of the housing field and then dividing into subcommittees to formulate concrete proposals for action.

"The Commission is delving deeper into housing than the state ever has before," says Secretary of Natural Resources and Community Development (NRCD) Joseph Grimsley. Gary Paul Kane, executive director of the N.C. Housing Finance Agency, underscores the importance of the Commission's work: "We are looking to the Study Commission to formulate its ideas of how housing programs should operate and then follow within that context. . . . [The Commission] will help us in maintaining a direction."

Rep. Cook, who served on the board of a Raleigh nonprofit housing group in the 1960s, began focusing on state housing programs when

appointed to the board of directors of the N.C. Housing Finance Agency (HFA) in 1981. Concerned about the lack of public members on the HFA board and about the HFA program, Cook began to see gaps in the state's efforts in housing. During the 1981 legislative session, a debate over the location of the HFA and six housing specialists within the state bureaucracy prompted a wider awareness of the housing problems and the creation of the Study Commission. "We really did not have an overall housing policy in the state," says Cook, now halfway through her tenure as chairperson of the Commission. "We do not know in this state what it is we need to do to provide what I consider a basic right of people — a right to shelter. I view the Commission as a major vehicle for providing a coherent housing policy for this state."

The Housing Study Commission has a structure similar to groups like the Savings and Loan and Mental Health Study Commissions, both of which have resulted in major legislation being passed. An independent body, not part of the ongoing Legislative Research Commission's work, the Housing Commission has a broad-based membership prescribed in the legislation (see list below), has

authority to seek funding from the state's Contingency and Emergency Fund (the Commission has received about \$30,000 thus far and may ask for more). and has the time to consider its subject thoroughly and develop public and legislative support for its recommendations. "Having differing points of view expressed on the Commission is very important," says Cook. "It enables Commission members to work through controversies and thus generate broad-based support for legislation that the Commission might propose."

Since January, the Commission has been meeting for two-day sessions once a month, in June breaking into three working subcommittees — on housing policies, on the housing economy, and on basic housing needs. Within these subcommittees, the Commission is considering everything from existing state housing programs (particularly the Housing Finance Agency and the Community Development Block Grant program) to housing code and zoning issues, from condominium conversion to local government initiatives.

The Commission is also concerned about coordination. "It's an underlying issue. We're very much aware of it," says Cook. "We don't necessarily think that we need to have more state agencies but we might need to have an ombudsman or an interagency effort in the housing field. Whether it's people looking for houses or developers who are interested in building housing or communities wanting assistance in providing housing, they need to go to the same place. It's something that we will address."

While the Commission has not yet formally decided upon its priority areas, the policy subcommittee and Rep. Cook have arrived at three tentative priorities: first, to provide for decent housing for those living in inadequate facilities;

second, to assist "middle income" North Carolinians in owning a home; and third, to ensure that North Carolina has a viable and healthy home construction and lending industry.

The Commission plans to issue a final report and recommend specific legislation. Some recommendations may also address existing rules and regulations and not require legislative changes. "I want the Commission to have a futuristic approach," says Cook, "to consider what the needs of people are in terms of requiring shelter and to devise whatever ways we can to facilitate that. That's the overall mission. I do not expect us to solve all the problems, but I expect us to solve some of them and to supply guidance and state a cohesive policy for housing in North Carolina. I would like to think that the report of this Commission will be used repeatedly and be updated when needed."

The outlook for the Commission appears bright, if enough legislative and public support can be generated for its recommendations. Rep. Cook and Sen. Robert Jordan (D-Montgomery), the vice-chairperson for the Commission, will provide the leadership in their respective legislative bodies. And the extent of support for the Commission's recommendations from Gov. James B. Hunt, Jr. will also be important. The Hunt administration is represented on the Commission through NRCDC Deputy Secretary James Summers, an ex-officio member.

At this stage, the Commission subcommittees are compiling long lists of possible recommendations for adoption by the Commission. Some of them might eventually make a difference in housing opportunities for North Carolinians. "We realize what an important charge we have," says Cook, "and we fully intend to carry it out." □

### The North Carolina Housing Programs Study Commission

<u>Members</u>	<u>Appointed by</u>	<u>Hometown</u>	<u>Represents</u>	<u>Subcommittee</u>
Rep. George Brannan	Speaker of the House	Smithfield	House of Representatives	State Housing Policy
William Breeze	Governor	Rougemont	Subsidized Housing Management	State Housing Policy
State Treasurer Harlan Boyles	Ex-Officio Member	Raleigh	Dept. of State Treasurer	State Housing Policy
Rep. Ruth E. Cook	Speaker of the House	Raleigh	House of Representatives	Commission Chairperson
Michael Ferguson	Speaker of the House	Waynesville	Realtors	Housing Economy
Sen. James B. Garrison	Lieutenant Governor	Albemarle	Senate	Housing Economy
Mickey Hanula	Speaker of the House	Raleigh	Public	Basic Housing Needs
Robert Harrington	Governor	Lewiston	Manufactured Housing	Basic Housing Needs
Joe E. Harris	Lieutenant Governor	Elkin	Savings and Loan	Housing Economy
Sen. Robert B. Jordan, III	Lieutenant Governor	Mt. Gilead	Senate	Commission Vice-Chairperson
Michael Stegman	Governor	Chapel Hill	Community Planner	State Housing Policy*
Durwood Stephenson	Lieutenant Governor	Smithfield	Builders	Housing Economy
NRCDC Dep. Sec. James Summers (for NRCDC Sec. Joseph Grimsley)	Ex-Officio Member	Raleigh	Dept. of Natural Resources and Community Development	State Housing Policy
Wade H. Thomas	Governor	Asheville	Public	Basic Housing Needs
David Weil	Governor	Goldsboro	Public Housing Policy	Housing Economy*
Leslie J. Winner	Governor	Charlotte	Public	Basic Housing Needs*
Jim Moore	Speaker of the House	Sylva	Mortgage Bankers	Housing Economy
Carl Johnson	Lieutenant Governor	Asheville	Public	Basic Housing Needs

\*Chairperson of Subcommittee