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House Manistee: Working Hard to Ensure Attainable Housing for All

House Manistee, an initiative that seeks to ensure attainable housing for all people who live, or want to live, in Manistee County, has been hard at work since its inception in late 2017. Significant progress has been made to seek out solutions, form partnerships and collaborative opportunities, and bring resources to the table to tackle the significant challenge of ensuring that the lack of housing in Manistee County is not a barrier to economic development; that people are able to live and work within the community in housing they can afford and that meets their needs.

The Home Builders Association of Michigan (HBA), in their recent 2017 Year End Report, pose the question “Where will ten million Michiganders Live?” “Economic development experts are speaking about how Michigan is at a critical crossroads”, says Bob Collins, Executive Officer of the Home Builders Association of West Michigan which represents Manistee, Lake, Mason, and Oceana Counties, “a juncture where the State has the potential for great economic growth but lacks the workforce and housing to fill the jobs that are so quickly being created”.

HBA cite that since the Great Recession, 60,000 home builders have left the State and not only are those workers not being replaced, but the means to train a workforce is no longer available.

Collins states that “Replacing those builders and their crews is a huge challenge to building housing units and to rehab existing housing.”

HBA also reports that the historic average number of homes being built is around 26,000 a year and last year only about 16,000 were built; a decrease that is nowhere near the need. Geographic discrepancies show that the location of those new homes aren’t necessarily evenly dispersed throughout the State. Builders are now, more than ever, building high end homes because they can be selective in their projects and only chose the ones that net the most profit; and they cite that building middle income, entry priced homes do not net them a profit.

Tamara Buswinka, Principle at Latitude 44 Consulting and Program Coordinator for AES House Manistee states that, “Those middle ranged priced homes are exactly the price range that will house our workforce. Because building housing that is affordable for our workforce doesn’t net a huge profit for developers, developers are selective in which communities they work in preferring ones that are not only development ready with approval processes that are fair, predictable, and timely but also have politicians and decision makers that are positive and willing to find solutions rather than put up barriers”.

This issue is bigger than the borders of Manistee County, it is a State of Michigan and national challenge. It is getting harder and harder to attain housing that the average Manistee worker can afford. The faces of those workers are people who work jobs such as firefighters, teachers, dental assistants, computer support specialists, veterinary assistants, hair stylists, painters.

“The growth of the workforce, and our ability to attract and keep talent, depends on having housing that is attainable for all. If so few housing units are being built, and the ones being built are not affordable to the average worker, the shortage will limit economic growth and stall prosperity,” says Jeff Dontz, Chair of the Manistee County Board of Commission.

House Manistee is spearheading efforts to address these issues by focusing on the following issues:

- Market and rental housing availability for both supportive and market rate housing choices for all income levels and groups (seniors, workforce, young professions, families, homeless) that is quality, safe, and accessible.
- Educational needs for homeowners, landlords, developers, government, community partners and other stakeholders.
- Coordinating and collaborating with existing housing programs and resources, helping to create new resources when gaps are identified.

The Vision of House Manistee is that there is attainable housing for all people who live, or want to live, in Manistee County. This vision will be achieved by pairing significant state and locally created resources to the solutions that are identified.

Four working groups have been created, and have met, to take positive steps towards solving issues that deal with increasing our housing stock options through policy and zoning, gaining access to resources to find and stay in existing housing and, becoming development ready, welcoming, and executing a “yes” culture.

In the three months since House Manistee was launched a website has been created that centralizes information about housing resources for renters, homeowners, and landlords, as well as advertising available rental units, spearheaded an understanding of local zoning related issues to the creation of new housing and utilization of existing

housing, cultivated relationships between people and organizations that work on housing related issues but from different perspectives and missions, and has helped spread the word that housing is not only a human service mission but also an economic development driver.

“Manistee County has a lot of different organizations, businesses, and agencies that work tirelessly on different aspects of the housing issue and I honor their work and hold them in high esteem,” says Buswinka, “House Manistee is meant to create partnerships between these folks who traditionally don’t work together, develop mutually reinforcing solutions, and build a communication network that creates a strong system wide approach to solving our housing problems.”

For more information go to:

Alliance for Economic Success website www.allianceforeconomicsuccess.com,

House Manistee website www.housemanistee.org

House Manistee Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/House-Manistee>

