

# THE JUMP

## ‘Aligning the stars’ toward affordable housing

Continued from Page 1

incomes to support new houses on a new lot, I can’t do that project.”

A compromise was reached between Sable Homes and the city of Newaygo. What resulted was the development of a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) plan, one that would see future tax revenues for the city of Newaygo and Newaygo County, collected from the new homes after they are purchased, being paid instead to Sable Homes over 10 years to help offset the cost of roads, ground-leveling and water mains, among other infrastructure needs.

With an additional compromise reached to remove the installation of public sidewalks, along with the TIF plan in place, an additional 16 homes will be available for purchase, constructed with prices Bitely estimates will range between \$190,000 and \$250,000.

“In Newaygo, they have more jobs available than they have people,” he said. “They made a commitment. I had to put up all the capital, build all the roads in advance, on the promise that I would be paid back on the increase in taxes. They had to give up future taxes — taxes they wouldn’t have had otherwise.”

Bitely said the successful River Hills Phase 2 project is one he wishes could occur more frequently in smaller communities such as Newaygo across West Michigan.

“Those projects do exist, but the stars have to align,” he said. “With Newaygo, we had a community that had everybody on board.”

### ‘NOT IN MY BACKYARD’

Despite his success in Newaygo, Bitely hasn’t been welcomed with open arms everywhere.

In 2016, the developer pursued a goal to construct a housing development in Sparta Township in northern Kent County, where he said he aimed to earn approval to construct nearly more than 80 homes on about 80 acres of vacant property — 44 acres for homes, 26 acres as designated open and common space.

However, Bitely immediately ran into opposition in the rural township of 9,400 residents.

“The community had a fit when I initially proposed 85 homes — ‘not in my backyard’ is what I heard,” he said.

According to meeting minutes from the Sparta Township Planning Commission and Township Board, in which public hearings on Bitely’s proposal were held, township residents voiced concerns ranging from safety issues regarding road sizes, increased traffic, septic tanks, too small of lot sizes, the development not consisting of a “rural setting” and also being located in what one resident described as “my backyard.”

Several of the residents said while they weren’t opposed to additional housing, they would instead rather see larger homes built on larger lots. But to construct affordable houses in areas that need additional housing, Bitely said there’s little option than to build higher-density projects on vacant properties in rural areas.

“If we’re going to fix this problem, it has to be in somebody’s backyard,” he said. “Places like Belding, Ionia — you’re in between two large communities (Lansing, Grand Rapids). If you don’t embrace some of these people (moving to your community), what’s going to happen?”

“If you don’t change, you’re going to die,” he continued. “There are communities, one right near mine, where they are now struggling. They lost their local food store, the local car dealership, nearly lost the pharmacy and they are down to one local restaurant — that’s all they can support.”

With nearly all of the smaller, rural communities he visits with a proposal, when Bitely asks that community to embrace his proposal, he says he hears the same thing — “This property is in a rural, farming community.”

What resulted from Bitely’s efforts in Sparta Township was an initial personal victory, only to eventually be overturned.

“Needless to say, the local Planning Commission succumbed to the pressure and after nearly three years of planning, I did get it approved,” Bitely said.

In October 2020, the Sparta Township Board approved his project, revised at 70



Developer John Bitely, owner of Sable Homes in Rockford, right, speaks at the United Way Community Leadership Conference on March 18 at Belding High School, where he shared his experience attempting to construct affordable, high-density housing projects in rural communities, as United Way Montcalm-Ionia Counties Executive Director Terri Legg listens at left. — DN Photo | Cory Smith

proposed single-family homes.

Additionally, it approved his rezoning request of the property from R-1 (low-density, single-family) and A-2 (agriculture) to a Planned Unit Development (PUD) featuring high-density housing, in a split 4-2 vote of the Board.

In defending its initial recommendation for approval by the Sparta Township Board, the Planning Commission said the development was compatible with the township’s Master Plan, which indicated the future land use classification of the property as “low-density residential and open space neighborhood,” intended primarily for “single-family houses in a subdivision or cluster-housing setting.”

But one month later, township residents submitted a successful petition to have a referendum vote on the decision.

A year later in the Aug. 3, 2021, election, the residents of Sparta Township overwhelmingly halted Bitely’s development by a measure of 985 to 262 votes — 79% to 21%.

“We lost the election and the project was out the door,” Bitely said.

Additionally, the Township Board approved a recommendation from the Planning Commission to issue a moratorium on PUD projects, preventing Bitely from re-applying with another proposal.

“The only alternative is to build less homes on larger parcels at a higher price range, but there’s no ALICE people that are going to live there,” Bitely said. “In Sparta, the whole community is ALICE or just barely above. When I started the project, the average home sale in that community was less than \$200,000, but I was told by one of the board members, ‘if we aren’t building \$500,000 homes, we aren’t interested.’”

### ‘HAPPENING LOCALLY?’

In listening to Bitely’s remarks regarding his failed proposal in Sparta Township, United Way Montcalm-Ionia Counties Executive Director Terri Legg said people don’t have to look far to see similar examples of stalled efforts locally.

“We’ve seen that happen locally, haven’t we?” she asked.

Legg was referring to a recent unanimous vote of the Eureka Township Planning Commission, which declined a request from developer Al Lehman of Al Lehman Construction to construct 14 homes on 20 acres of vacant land.

Lehman had requested the property, currently zoned agricultural, be rezoned to suburban residential so he could build homes on lots less than one acre in size. But his proposal to turn a property in a rural neighborhood, one that had been farmed for decades, and instead erect more than a dozen homes on it, was met with initial uncertainty as commissioners weighed the need to construct more housing against uprooting a traditional agricultural portion of the township.

“That is part of our Master Plan, to maintain agricultural use there, but with the need for more housing ... Grand Rapids is running out of room,” Vice Chairman Marty Posekany said at a January

meeting.

However, following a public hearing in February that generated only complaints from neighboring property owners, Lehman’s request was denied by the Commission.

“Rural residential, in my mind, would be more in keeping with (the area), rather than going to suburban residential,” Posekany said of the property at a February meeting. “We have that forecasted out as suburban residential secondary, but I would anticipate with the next update of the Master Plan, which occurs every five years, that that would be put into rural residential.”

Under such a proposal, which would require lot sizes greater than at least two acres per home, developers such as Bitely argue no “affordable” homes could be constructed to meet the growing housing demand.

“On every level, density is being reduced,” he said. “In how many of our communities have we heard ‘we like it the way it is, we don’t want it to change?’ If we talk about building three houses per acre, we’ll have this auditorium packed with people telling us ‘that’s too close, don’t live there.’”

Bitely said there is a growing demand, especially from younger generations, to move out of larger cities and find an affordable single-family home in a more suburban setting.

“Our millennials are very happy to live in a community like that,” he said. “They grew up happy living in downtown, inner cities, in a townhouse, spending the first 10 years of their lives getting their lives established in communities like that. Now, they are more than glad to live that way (suburban developments), but yet our community leaders are saying, ‘No. If it’s not two acres or more, we don’t want a house on it.’”

When searching for any sort of compromise, Bitely and Legg said it’s going to take community involvement and collaboration to find a resolution in addressing a lack of affordable housing locally in both Montcalm and Ionia counties.

“It’s going to take a lot of partnership to make this work,” Legg said. “In many of our communities, one side of the street is the city, the other side is the township. We have to work together.”

“If you don’t encourage some growth, you’re going to die — communities need to hear that,” Bitely added. “So I’m going to encourage people to become these community leaders. Some (public officials) are not going to change their minds and the only way you are going to change things is by voting. One of my goals was to make some of you uncomfortable, to wake you up. At the end of the day, it’s what we do that makes a difference. We can fix these problems.”

“Most of our communities do not need a 300-home development,” he continued. “They need about 50 to 80 homes at a time. That is the growth amount we can sustain, that is the amount I can build because of today’s restrictions on labor. That’s about what our infrastructures can support.”



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## Panic attacks

Let’s talk about panic attacks. Have you ever felt like your heart is pounding so fast that it’s hard to breathe? Or maybe you quickly felt dizzy or lightheaded as your anxiety suddenly skyrocketed. Maybe you even felt like you were dying in the moment. Your body likely began sweating as adrenaline consumed you. These are all signs that you were panicking, which is normal anytime we face a dangerous situation. But did you also know that panic attacks can occur even in the absence of danger?

Panic attacks are sudden, intense waves of significant fear or very high-level anxiety with or without the actual presence of real danger. Sometimes they may be triggered by specific situations. For example, if someone has a phobia of flying, they may experience a panic attack when arriving to an airport. Other times, panic attacks may occur randomly without a trigger. For example, sometimes people experience panic attacks simply because they have a biological predisposition to neurotransmitters in the brain that elicit feelings of panic. Worry is our brain’s way of trying to protect ourselves from perceived threats. When our worries become too intense, or when we find ourselves suddenly absorbing a great deal of worry all at once, a panic attack usually occurs.

Specifically for people who have experienced past trauma, panic attacks may occur throughout the lifespan. It makes sense that someone would panic during a traumatic event, but why do some trauma survivors also experience panic attacks throughout their lives? This is often because the traumatic incident created a new way for your brain to operate. Panic attacks are certainly unpleasant, but there are many ways to cope with them. Below are strategies that you might find helpful.

Remember that it will pass: During a panic attack, remember these feelings will pass. Although panic attacks can feel incredibly scary, the panic itself does not cause any physical harm. This is helpful to remember especially when we find ourselves panicking during a normal day when we are not faced with any real danger. We must remember that our feelings are valid — and the panic attack is very real — but we must also acknowledge that panicking is not going to harm us.

If needed, ask people in your support system if they will allow you to text or call them during a panic attack. Tell them in advance that you might need help remembering that a sudden panic attack will pass. Help the people closest to you understand in advance that panicking is a brief period of concentrated anxiety that will be over soon. Utilizing their support can also help you feel less alone during a panic attack, which may in itself help you move through the panic more quickly.

Focus on your breathing: During a panic attack, try to focus exclusively on the air coming in and out of your lungs. It can be helpful to shut out everything happening around you and simply focus on feeling the air enter your body through your nose, traveling to your stomach and diaphragm, and then back up and out.

Remember that your mind is likely to wander in different directions as you try to focus on your breaths, but that is perfectly OK. It is not necessary to force your mind to be completely still. Allow your mind to wander wherever it may go, but always bring your attention back to the air traveling in and out of your body. Take as long as you need.

Notice your surroundings: It can also be helpful to look around at your surroundings and notice what you see. Consciously try to shift your attention away from the panic attack and start to notice the things around you.

Visualize being in a safe place: When we are experiencing a panic attack, we feel unsafe. Whether or not there is real danger present, the feeling of not being safe is real. Try to imagine yourself sitting in your favorite safe place. This should be a place where you have previously experienced significant calm and relaxation.

If you have questions or if I can be a resource for you, please don’t hesitate to reach out. Your mental health matters.

Lauren Presutti is a mental health therapist at Transitions Counseling Services in Greenville.

## Belding DDA looks to change ‘Adopt-A-Spot’ garden

Continued from Page 1

John Leppink for keeping up their spaces.

“I was on the DDA board many years ago when it looked unsightly and ... the council basically commanded that the DPW clean up everything, put mulch in, weed, trim, and it took the DPW devoted time for a whole week,” Carlson said. “The cost of that was ungodly, not to mention it took DPW staff workers away from their normal routine, just to clean up the downtown. I think that’s an inappropriate use of DPW personally.”

She said she was in favor of trying to obtain some uniformity, and added that it is “unfair” to put the burden of the program on Cooper and “unrealistic” to think that the city will maintain the spots.

City Manager Jon Stoppels suggested discerning what mulch keeps its color the best — and then using only that mulch.

“We’ve got to do it right. There’s got to be WeedBlock (landscape fabric) laid underneath it, the chips have to be durable, evergreens, low maintenance stuff that doesn’t have to be trimmed all the time. Then you just give somebody a bucket of RoundUp and sprayer, and before the weeds even develop you spray,” Stoppels suggested, adding that he used to manage

a complex of 144 condominiums. “That got to be our standard, and people loved it. They didn’t miss the flowers, the annuals. They said, ‘We like the greens on the ground, there’s never weeds in it, we’re happy.’”

Carlson suggested moving toward the objective outlined by Stoppels, getting the spots cleaned up and having some uniformity, then reaching out to those who have had a spot in the past and asking if they would be interested in donating to the project without being expected to maintain a spot.

### FIXING WHAT’S BROKEN

Stoppels noted that the theme for the DDA this year is “we need to fix what’s broken.”

“There came a point where the amenities in the parks and the common areas went way beyond what our current staffing can handle,” he said. “So instead of them taking the heat for not doing it right, we’re going to start looking at, OK, how do we fix what’s broken ... before we add anything else.”

Stoppels plans to implement a program where people can sponsor items like worn-out benches from a catalog of items, whether that is purchasing a new one or

underwriting the refurbishing of an old one to make it look new. He said the garden spots could be added to the catalog, and people could donate toward it and have their names added to a sign in a common area. In areas that can’t be dug into, some above-ground planters with a tree or shrub could be added, with seating.

“I think there’d be plenty of opportunities for people to donate,” said Stoppels. “And do we get volunteer work and have a couple workdays — that might be even better yet. A lot of options there.”

The board agreed to get rid of the existing signs, get costs from Nature’s Needs and River Ridge Landscaping to, by Memorial Day, clean out the beds, trim and edge them and put down landscaping fabric and stained brown mulch, and possibly thank donors in the city of Belding newsletter in lieu of a general sign. Carlson asked Cooper to email the information to board members so they can decide their next meeting on May 4.

The DDA has \$5,000 in its current year budget and a proposed \$5,000 in the next fiscal year budget, which starts July 1, that it can spend without council authorization, Stoppels said.

The Belding City Council has not yet approved the 2022-2023 annual budget.