

John O'Neill
P.O. Box 33
8944 S. Kasson St.
Cedar, MI 49621

December 13, 2021

Chet Janik
Leelanau County Administrator
8527 E. Government Center Drive
Suite #101
Suttons Bay, MI 49682

Dear Mr. Janik:

Given a dental appointment, I am not able to attend the Committee of the Whole Meeting of the County Commissioners, Monday, December 13, 2021. Kindly read this letter to the commissioners.

Dear Leelanau County Commissioners:

For over two decades, Leelanau County has been challenged by a severe housing shortage: working people earning typical local wages can afford to rent or purchase modest places to live. Study after study has documented this critical need.

Striking county metrics are that the percentage of young families with children is very low and the proportion of older resident is highest in the state. While individual families are most directly affected, it's important to understand that the entire Leelanau County community is adversely affected. Schools lose students, which reduces the funding available to educate all students. Local businesses suffer a lack of workers; as a consequence, hours and services must be cut back. Stories of businesses hiring a person who, because they cannot secure a suitable place to live turns down the job are common. Some businesses have even closed. Residents seeking these services find that it is more difficult to meet their needs. The lack of decent homes and rentals affects the entire region.

Ours is one of the hottest real estate markets in the state. In a perfect world, the private sector would respond to this need by building new, modest homes and apartments. Yet builders are well aware that to build such dwellings, that they would need to sell such units barely above their costs, while the return on large homes is bountiful.

Covid has placed additional burdens on the production of units that working people can manage. These include lockdowns, labor shortages, and supply chain problems directly related to Covid and the Covid recession that have made materials even more expensive and hard to purchase. People have also been displaced from their homes by the loss of jobs and other income.

The gaping shortage of modest dwellings is a community-wide need that market forces cannot meet. Under these circumstances, it is not only appropriate that government should respond, it is imperative. Progress will be elusive without a concerted county response. The last twenty years have made this painfully clear.

Among other actions, townships are finally beginning to examine the zoning roadblocks that make the production of needed dwellings more difficult such as minimum lot and building size. Of course, the high cost of building has always made a robust county response to our housing crisis problematic for commissioners, and rightly so. The American Rescue Plan Act has eliminated this budgetary concern. ARPA has specifically identified housing as an area suitable for funds.

Given these factors, a widespread and persistent lack of decent homes that workers can manage, the market's inability to respond, the fact that businesses, schools, consumers, families and children, in short the entire community is harmed, and the funds at hand, the County Commission should identify housing as the county's top priority and commit most of the ARPA funds toward addressing it.

While I have been a member of the Housing Action Committee since the County Commission established it, I do have one issue with the committee's recommendations: given the critical need, the level of funding suggested is too modest. Commissioners follow the HAC recommendations, including allocating funds for seed money for Habitat, HomeStretch and other nonprofit developers, establish a partnership with the Land Bank, provide infrastructure support for community waste water for multi-family units, provide incentives for developers and municipalities, and establish a revolving loan fund. Since that letter was written, we have seen the establishment of a Community Land trust and Housing

North has begun to seek funding for a local Housing Advocate; the loan fund and seed money for nonprofits should be extended to these activities as well.

While the County Commission has received many requests for ARPA funding for good programs, none address a need as wide, as critical, and as persistent as the housing crisis. This is the most pressing need to come before the commission. It has been begging for action for more than two decades. The funds are there, we must act boldly and allocate ARPA funds equal to the challenge.

Thank you,

John O'Neill

I have devoted much of my life to emergency and affordable housing, including as a volunteer in emergency housing shelters, as the first director of Habitat for Humanity GTR, Director of Lake County Habitat, Executive Director the Benzie Housing Council for nearly a decade, board member of HomeStretch, and as a grant writer for the Goodwill Inn. I currently serve as a member of the Housing Action Committee and as a volunteer for Habitat for Humanity, GTR. With my wife Linda I have lived and worked in Leelanau County for over 40 years.