Age-Friendly Communities
Quality Services for a Quality Community

December 17, 2020

To the Honorable Mayor Stevens, and City Council Members:

From the time it was established by East Lansing City Council in 2017, the East Lansing Age-Friendly Community (AFC) Steering Committee has worked with community members and City staff to promote East Lansing as an Age-Friendly Community in accordance with the requirements established by the World Health Organization and AARP. Those efforts include the development of the Action Plan approved by City Council on February 20, 2020, the adoption of which resulted in the City’s designation as an Age-Friendly Community by the WHO and AARP. Since that time, the AFC Steering Committee has continued to support the City in promoting and achieving the goals set forth in the Action Plan.

One important factor, referred to as a “domain” in the Action Plan, is housing. The availability of appropriate housing for people of various income levels in the 55 plus age group is a significant need for East Lansing as an Age-Friendly place to live, and the efforts of East Lansing City Council to promote diversity of housing in the downtown area is very important. The inclusion of the Newman Lofts, apartments restricted to those 55 and over, in a recent downtown development is a contribution to East Lansing’s Age-Friendly status. It is distressing to learn that the developer of those apartments is now seeking to have the age restriction for those apartments nullified.

The AFC Steering Committee at its October 15, 2020 meeting, discussed the Newman Lofts efforts to avoid its obligation to provide housing dedicated to people 55+ in age, an obligation that is included in the agreements which allowed the developer to occupy city land for the building of a portion of its development. Given that one of the AFC’s Housing Domain goals addresses senior housing, the Committee firmly believes it is in the best interests of achieving and maintaining East Lansing’s status as an Age-Friendly City to insist that all developments, including the large development of which Newman Lofts is an important component, meet the commitment to City policy and requirements. This Committee’s discussion raised other issues concerning City requirements for: 1) the use of universal design in newly built/upgraded units and 2) affordability versus value. In the case of Newman Lofts, those issues provide examples of a character applicable to all city housing development.
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Members of the East Lansing Senior Commission toured Newman Lofts prior to opening and noted that the apartments did not appear to meet common or basic universal design standards. For example, the units contained bathtubs instead of roll-in/walk-in showers; there were no grab bars or handrails, some cabinets in the kitchen were out of reach, and there was no lighting over the kitchen sink. The developer’s response was their units were for “active seniors”. Of course, an active senior, or anyone else, may encounter challenges that make accessibility important. It is for this reason that the AFC Steering Committee applauds the actions of the City to incorporate universal design in new projects. The Committee also recommends that all City requirements for universal design, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance, and other federal and state requirements for accessibility/livability be reviewed, and updated to ensure that seniors and those with disabilities are included in zoning, planning and building decisions. Once these measures are complete, enforcement must be consistently applied.

Housing affordability centers on too high base rental fees. Here again Newman Lofts provides an example. Their promotional materials indicate that rents range from $1,595.00 – $2,935.00 per month. Added to rent is $70.00 per month for parking and $100.00 per month for water, sewer, trash, and internet access. Electricity, natural gas, and storage space are the financial responsibility of the tenant based on usage and needs. The expected costs for a unit with one bedroom, a den and 1.5 bathrooms start at $1920.00 per month, plus the parking and fees noted above. This would start at approximately $2090.00+ per month or $26,080.00 a year. This estimated monthly cost is above the average Social Security payment of $1,514.00 per month or $18,168.00 yearly. The AFC Committee recommends that developers be required to include total rental cost estimates, based on documented income data, as part of their planning, literature, and promotions.

These issues are prime factors in senior citizens making decisions about where they want to live. The AFC Committee recommends that information provided to developers and builders include design requirements and affordability versus value issues in their planning, commitments, and promotions. The AFC Steering Committee recognizes that the City has limited resources. The Committee believes that the above recommendations can be accomplished through existing City processes and mechanisms without the necessity of additional resources.
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Sincerely,
The Age Friendly Communities Steering Committee