

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month

In 2021, there were 577 investigations assigned in Ionia County and 729 assigned in Montcalm County. Experiencing abuse or neglect as a child hinders healthy development and outcomes in adulthood.

If you suspect child abuse or neglect, please call 855-444-3911. It is available 24/7.



The Belding Downtown Development Authority on Wednesday decided to make changes to the "Adopt-A-Spot" program, where spaces like this one outside the city's Covered Village Mall have been maintained by volunteers since 2015. The program is "dying," said City Clerk Janae Cooper. — DN Photo | Karen Bota

Belding DDA looks to change 'Adopt-A-Spot' garden

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BELDING — The Belding Downtown Development Authority (DDA) is eyeing changes to a beautification program ahead of Memorial Day.

The Adopt-A-Spot program began in August 2015 with 40 downtown flowerbeds. Since then, hundreds of individuals, families, organizations and businesses have "adopted" a spot, planted flowers, cleaned up weeds and maintained the area, in exchange for a sign that recognized their efforts.

The DDA purchased landscaping mulch, and the city provided biodegradable yard waste bags if requested to assist with clean-up.

Participants were encouraged to prepare their areas by Memorial Day, and maintain them throughout the season, particularly for the Gus Macker and Labor Day weekends.

Belding City Clerk Janae Cooper told the DDA at its meeting Wednesday afternoon that in her three years coordinating the program, she has had difficulty filling the spots, or people commit but don't follow through. She estimated that she had fewer than half of the spots adopted last year. While the program may have been great in the beginning, "it's dying now," she told board members.

"I've spent a great deal of time on this trying to chase things around," said Cooper. "Right after I spent all this time last year trying to work on this, and it still looks, unfortunately, like it does."

Another frustration with the signs. Despite calls and emails, Cooper hasn't had a response from the company that was changing them and has only been able to get one sign changed. There also is inconsistency in the way the beds are maintained.

"I was in two meetings back to back where people commented how beautiful other people's cities were," said Cooper. "I think it looks better, and the other areas that people have recommended, when everything is consistent. Just put mulch in and don't plant anything — because we've got all different things — or maybe just have some low-maintenance shrubs and some mulch."

She suggested having the company that provides the mulch turn it during the season, and if people want to adopt-a-spot, they could do so by donating to the general program and receiving recognition.

"It would save a lot of work on me, and save a lot of postage, a lot of emails," Cooper said.

Board Chairwoman Sharon Carlson thanked DDA board member Bruce Feuerstein and business owner

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'Aligning the stars' toward affordable housing



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

Developer chronicles struggles, successes of working in rural communities to construct high-density housing

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BELDING — As a contractor who has built numerous homes and developments for more than 25 years, John Bitely has long been familiar with the housing industry as trends come and go.

What he's experienced recently, however, is something that stands alone.

Housing, especially affordable housing, has been more in-demand in recent years than the developer has ever witnessed. While such demand would normally be met with a market of available housing, there's currently seldom a house to be found.

Speaking at the United Way Community Leadership Conference on March 18 at Belding High School, Bitely shared his thoughts on an issue he said will take higher levels of involvement from local communities to solve. He said this is especially true in looking to create an affordable market of homes for those who are designated as ALICE — Asset Limited, Income Constrained and Employed.

ALICE residents have been identified as living in households with combined incomes above the federal poverty line, but who still do not earn enough to afford the essentials of housing, child care, food, transportation, health care and other needs.

"We all can probably agree that we need housing, but the challenge is, how do we keep it affordable, how do we make it work out, especially toward this ALICE group, especially the lower groups beyond that?" Bitely asked. "One of the things that is going on right now, there isn't any housing available. If you

FOCUS ON HOUSING

This is the fourth in a series of stories about housing issues in Montcalm and Ionia counties.

are a young person trying to get started and you're ready to buy your first home, there's nothing available."

As housing prices have skyrocketed in the last two years, with the majority of homes being sold well above the asking price, Bitely said it's rare to find anything at \$200,000 or below while being deemed a desirable place to permanently live.

"Your average rental unit is very likely nicer," he said.

Part of the issue, according to Bitely, is that newly built homes that could potentially be sold at a more affordable price range simply can't be built.

"What's happening to myself and my company, we're not allowed to build these houses anymore," he said.

'STARS HAVE TO ALIGN'

As the owner of Sable Homes in Rockford, Bitely has overseen the construction of more than 1,000 homes over his tenure with the company. Of 31 Sable Home properties currently listed available for sale throughout West Michigan on the Sable website, the prices range from \$250,000 in Newaygo to \$445,000 in Caledonia.

However, Bitely said it is his personal desire to pursue building homes that are on the more affordable end of that spectrum.

"Number one, it's my passion," he said. "If you've come to know me, you know I grew up top-level ALICE. Most

of my family are ALICE, as far as my generation of family members, so yes, while I have experience in upper-level homes, this is who I am."

Looking to expand upon that desire, Bitely eventually saw an opportunity in rural West Michigan.

"I went to a community and asked to do workforce housing — we call it attainable housing," he said. "Attainable housing is different to everyone, but as our wage groups get lower, so does the attainability."

That community was the city of Newaygo — a community of about 2,100 residents — in Newaygo County, where Bitely's concept of attainable housing appeared to be in demand.

In 2017, Sable Homes took over a dormant development, River Hills Estates, which had sat unfinished for nearly 15 years after the original developer pulled out with only four homes completed. Sable Homes then built and sold homes on the remaining 27 empty lots.

"I bought a discounted, already-developed property and that allowed an extra \$20,000 discount (per house)," Bitely said. "Because of that discount, we were selling those houses left and right."

However, to pursue a "Phase 2" of the development, Bitely couldn't build affordable homes — along with \$300,000 in infrastructure costs needed for them — and still turn a profit.

"Newaygo is very similar to Ionia and Belding," he said. "Your economic numbers, in order for us to be a profitable company, we cannot hit the right price levels of housing for your average incomes. If you don't have high enough

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