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Greenville councilperson asks for greater focus on addressing affordable housing options

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By Cory Smith

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Greenville City Councilperson Larry Moss, right, who is also the council's liaison on the Planning Commission, delivered speeches during the June 13 meeting of the commission and June 18 meeting of the council where he asked that more be done to accommodate affordable housing for residents in the city. Planning Commissioner Doug McFadden listens, at left, during the June 13 meeting. — DN Photo | Cory Smith

GREENVILLE — As a member of the Greenville City Council and serving as the liaison on the Planning Commission, Larry Moss has observed his fair share of housing development proposals in recent years.

Since 2020, more than 292 new apartment units have been constructed in the city, primarily via the Central Park and Crescent View apartment complexes south of Meijer.

Construction has now begun on a mix of 114 single-family and duplex units in the Forest View subdivision on Greenville West Drive, along with the construction of 45 new single family homes in the Edgewood Village subdivision in the southeast corner of the city.

And nearly complete is the Hawthorne Park subdivision in the southwest corner of the city, which since 2018 has had nearly all 61 of its remaining single-family home lots built upon, with many of the lots marked as “sold” before the foundation for the home is even poured.

In total and upon completion, those recent projects will account for 512 new units of housing in the city at minimum — not including several other smaller-scale single family and condominium projects in the city.

During the June 13 meeting of the commission and June 18 meeting of the council, Moss placed an emphasis on that boom in housing, giving a nearly 15-minute prepared speech at the conclusion of each meeting.

However, Moss' thoughts weren't celebratory; rather, he brought forth his concerns over what he perceives as a continued lack of affordable, workforce housing in the city, despite the rash of recent construction.

“As we've often noted, these spec homes are often sold before the ground is even broken and that is great for Greenville. It's a boost to our economy,” he said. “But every time we ask if these projects will include affordable, workforce housing, the answer is always the same — ‘we can't afford to build those homes because there is no profit in them’ — to which I say, we can't afford to not build these homes. Our people need a place where they can afford to live.”

A picture of housing insecurity

Moss began his remarks, which played out nearly identically at each meeting, painting a picture of his life as a college student in Chicago years ago.

According to Moss, during his final semester at Columbia College, he encountered a period of homelessness after his previous living arrangement with a former girlfriend dissipated.

“My first night I slept on a public bench at the bus stop in front of Duncan Donuts on Belmont Avenue,” he recalled. “The second night I spent curled up in my storage locker. By the third night, I had found a cheap hotel on the near north side and paid for a week’s lodging.”

Moss said he began couch surfing between friends, even relying on the couch of one of his professors on weekends.

“I had no home, no income to speak of,” he said. “I was not safe, not secure. I ate infrequently, but I somehow got my homework done and was able to keep my grades up.”

Moss eventually landed a part-time job and earned enough to pay for a small apartment, providing some housing stability.

He recalled his story before both the commission and City Council because he believes there are members of the community who are experiencing something similar to a national housing crisis.

“I wanted to tell you this story so you understand that I have a little bit of credibility on this topic,” he said. “Personally, I know of young adults who are living in their cars at the Walmart or Meijer parking lots in Greenville. They are working DoorDash, Shipt or as an Uber driver in Grand Rapids, but the commute means they are paying a significant portion of their income on gas and car expenses and fast food meals, leaving little for housing.”

Moss pointed to data provided in recent ALICE (Asset, Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) reports from United Way, which showcase a growing number of individuals in the community who, while not in poverty, remain unable to earn enough to cover the basic costs of living.

“Housing insecurity comes in many forms and homelessness is just the bottom rung,” he said. “Even those with means can sometimes find themselves not able to keep up with the life they anticipated. A Greenville couple I know recently had their mortgage foreclosed. They both suffered serious health crises, fell behind in their payments and lost their home. It can only take a moment for one’s life to change abruptly.”

‘There is a housing crisis in Greenville’

Moss believes the city needs to take more specific action to address the issue of the lack of affordable, workforce housing.

“We should be aware by now that there is a housing crisis in Greenville — indeed, state and nationwide,” he said. “It hasn’t gotten better, it’s gotten worse.

To put things into greater perspective, according to [apartments.com](https://www.apartments.com), the average rent of a one-bedroom apartment in Greenville is \$1,112 per month. That rate jumps to an average of \$1,323 for a two-bedroom apartment and \$1,548 for a three-bedroom apartment.

Current listings on the website for an apartment in Crescent View Village for a one-to-two bedroom apartment list between \$1,295 to \$1,695 per month.

Additionally, three-to-four-bedroom homes ranging between 1,800 to 2,000 square feet in size in the Hawthorn Park subdivision have been listed and selling at prices ranging anywhere from \$284,900 to \$329,900, according to the website of the developer constructing and selling the homes, Allen Edwin Homes ([allenedwin.com](https://www.allenedwin.com)).

The city does currently offer income-based subsidized housing through the Greenville Housing Commission, with apartment complexes that include Friendship House (89 units), Chase Ridge Townhouses (61 units) and several additional single family houses.

However, all of those units are currently waitlisted.

Additionally, privately owned apartment complexes such as Cambridge Court Apartments (32 units), Fairway Glen Apartments (20 units), Greenbriar Apartments (40 units), Hidden Pines (40 units) and Pine Manor (30 units) all participate in subsidized offerings, but are also most-often full.

As a result, Moss believes more affordable housing options are needed.

“We have several subsidized housing developments in Greenville, but they are full,” he said. “The application process can be complicated, intimidating and intrusive. The waiting list is often years to get in ... Colleagues, we need to start focusing on housing that meets the needs of all of our citizens, not just those who can afford the best.”

Moss pointed to the recent scheduling of a public hearing to be held for approval of four new condominium duplex lots as another example of more housing coming in that he believes will not be considered affordable.

“We get a parade of developers coming to us with grand plans for PUDs (planned unit developments) for single-family homes, site condominiums, townhomes, condos and high-end apartments ... But if the developers can’t or won’t help us meet the needs of our community then maybe we should rethink our approach to the housing issue,” he said.

Solutions?

Moss said it’s his goal that the city can begin exploring additional options.

“I’m hoping over the next several weeks and months we can continue to discuss this crisis and search for reasonable, workable solutions,” he said.

Moss presented his own list of options, which included:

- Require that any new development plans include 10% ALICE-qualified workforce housing.
- Change our housing ordinance to allow alternative dwelling units
- Adopt, allow and promote the Michigan Municipal League’s pattern-books homes.
- Apply for additional subsidized housing from state and federal agencies.
- Allow for more R3 zones in city neighborhoods.
- Develop the Electrolux and Northland properties as mixed neighborhoods with single family homes, duplexes, townhomes and apartment buildings with 10% ALICE-qualified homes.

“These are just suggestions, but I’d like to hear more ideas that truly can make Greenville, my hometown, a great place to live, work and play for everyone,” Moss said.

Mayor Jeff Scoby said he appreciated Moss’ passion on the subject.

“Larry, I appreciate your comments. They are very compassionate and very put together,” he said. “I’d like to see where things go with that. I think everybody should be able to afford housing and I think we should be able to provide for everybody in the community.”

Scoby, who works as a plant manager Dicastal, added that he believes industry in the city continues to offer well-paying jobs, many with open positions available.

“The company, Green Shield, they are coming to Greenville and will be bringing 300 jobs, that’s the plan,” he said. “Other businesses out there in the city are in need of employees. I don’t speak for my place of employment, but some of the other businesses I work with, they are looking for people. It’s tough work, but it’s a job. That’s not to mention the amount of support MCC provides our community to train and educate. All around, our community, and in my experiences with the county, township and the city, we have a lot of great things to admire and a lot of great things to look forward to.”

During the commission meeting, Chairperson David Ralph thanked Moss for his comments while also adding his own perspective.

“To further this discussion going forward, I have some thoughts. One is, getting a clear understanding of the role of the Planning Commission in addressing aspects of what you presented and where the lines are drawn in terms of our ability to contribute to that effort,” he said. “Things like ordinance changes, that would certainly qualify. It can be presented for question and then we can ask for the reply as to how we can consider it. That would probably be the first, most important step for the Planning Commission. Beyond that, certainly all ideas are always welcome. Probably going forward, the best presentation for those ideas will be to hopefully, in addition to starting the conversation, directing questions through staff to (city planner Andy Moore) so we can get something on the agenda to plan for discussion, so we are ready for a full discussion. If it’s random, it will not be productive.”

City Manager George Bosanic, who was present for both meetings, also responded to Moss’ remarks.

“With respect to your suggestions, there are some of those that are pretty relatively low-hanging fruit and they have been on my radar screen as well,” he said. “So I think maybe we can talk about some of that.”

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