

# Groups Join Forces To Lobby For Affordable Housing



Tony Lentych, Tom Mathieu, Mark Jansen at a Ferris Development Corporation construction site in Lansing.

**T**here has been a proliferation of lobbyists and interest groups in Lansing during the past decade. The number of registered lobbyists has grown by a reported 10 percent in just the last four years.

One of the notable newcomers is Tony Lentych, executive director of the Community Economic Development Association of Michigan (CEDAM). A full-time advocate for neighborhoods and community groups throughout Michigan, CEDAM hired Lentych away from the Indianapolis Coalition for Neighborhood Development in 2000.

Established in 1998, CEDAM spent much of its first two years on organizational issues. Lentych's hiring provided the group, which has nearly 200 members, with its first executive director and lobbyist.

The top item on CEDAM's legislative agenda is to

## Two former lawmakers hammer home the need to establish a permanent trust fund to help address the state's housing needs.

establish a permanent, \$25-million Affordable Housing Fund in Michigan to provide affordable housing for working families. Nationwide, 37 states have housing trust funds, and *Governing* magazine consistently ranks Michigan near the bottom nationally (48<sup>th</sup> in 2000 and 2001) on per-capita spending on housing.

One potential funding source is a Single Business Tax credit. The housing fund would leverage other public and private investments and help create 2,500 jobs in construction and related trades. It would help develop more than 1,000 affordable homes and assist 1,500 "special needs" households every year.

"Linking the SBT to affordable housing makes sense, because housing is an important economic development tool," explains Lentych. "It can stabilize the workforce and add to the local tax base."

But CEDAM's efforts to establish a housing trust fund hit a brick wall during the Engler Administration. In 1999 Engler announced an Affordable Housing Fund, but it was supported with excess Federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Family funds that couldn't be used for construction purposes.

"Many local groups have their own resources in place, and the feds have several programs including Community Development Block Grants," says Gary Heidel, director of Program Policy and Market Research for the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA). "We need to do more at the state level to address the growing need for affordable housing and community development."

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“Affordable housing” generally means the occupant pays less than a third of his or her income for rent or mortgage payments, plus utilities and insurances. The housing also must be decent and safe. A recent report prepared by Public Sector Consultants for CEDAM estimates that as many as 672,000 Michigan households,

**“Affordable housing can stabilize the workforce and add to the local tax base.”**

about 18.5 percent of all residences, are lower-income households facing housing problems.

With all the new legislators and a new administration, CEDAM is hopeful there will be a change in priorities, although Lentych is also a realist. “It’s going to be a hard sell,” he says. “The budget shortfall overshadows everything.”

CEDAM is forming the Michigan Housing Future Coalition with two other statewide nonprofit organizations to help advance the idea of a permanent trust fund. They are Habitat for Humanity, the high-profile national program made famous by former President Jimmy Carter, and the Michigan Community Action Agency Association (MCAAA), a statewide network of 30 community action agencies that provide services to the poor and elderly.

Two former Grand Rapids legislators—one a Republican, one a Democrat—represent the two groups.

Mark C. Jansen, one of 20 term-limited members of the House of Representatives in 2002, will join the Lansing staff of Habitat for Humanity.

“As a legislator, Mark carried the torch for simple, decent housing,” says Dr. Kenneth Benson, president of Habitat for Humanity of Michigan. “We are happy and excited to have him working for us on our 21<sup>st</sup> Century challenge.”

Jansen spent three years in the mid-’80s as a missionary in Kentucky, working in an interdenominational agency addressing social, health and housing needs. While in the legislature, he led House Republicans to build a Habitat for Humanity house in 1997 and another in 1999, raising \$60,000 for each one and spearheading their completion in less than two weeks.

Thomas C. Mathieu, a state representative for 24 years, has been MCAAA’s executive director for four years. Before being elected to the house in 1974, Mathieu was director of Community Development for Kent Community Action in Grand Rapids.

MCAAA’s 30 community action agencies cover Michigan’s 83 counties and provide services to 1.5 million residents; everything from Head Start to Meals on Wheels. The agencies employ more than 4,000 people and administer \$250 million in federal, state and local resources each year.

“We all have a stake in trying to eliminate substandard housing,” says Jansen. “We plan to target 15- to 20-block areas in five urban and rural communities and focus everybody’s talents and resources. We will include churches, neighborhood groups, corporations, foundations—a comprehensive approach. By targeting a smaller area,

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it’s easier to measure the results over a five to six-year period.”

All three organizations in the coalition rely heavily on volunteer helpers. Mathieu estimates that each of Michigan’s community action agencies has benefited from tens of thousands of hours of volunteer work since they began empowering low-income families and individuals to become more self-sufficient more than 30 years ago.

“Volunteers are the lifeblood of our organizations,” says CEDAM’s Lentych. “They help build strong and cohesive communities by fostering trust and economic regeneration. Volunteerism also helps reduce the burden on government spending.”

Lentych and his counterparts at MCAAA and Habitat for Humanity long for the day when a fiscally sound state government can return the favor with a permanent Affordable Housing Fund. ❖❖

### Capitol Backgrounds...

#### Mark C. Jansen

State Representative from Grand Rapids; Gaines Township Clerk.

#### Tony Lentych

Executive Director, Indianapolis Coalition for Neighborhood Development; Director of Resource Development and Communications for Partners in Housing Development Corporation.

#### Thomas C. Mathieu

State Representative from Grand Rapids; Director of Community Development, Kent County Action Agency; Director, West Side Complex Neighborhood Center, Grand Rapids.