

**CITY OF HARPER WOODS**  
**NEIGHBORHOOD IMPROVEMENT PLAN**  
**CITY MANAGERS REVIEW**

I have finished reviewing the draft of the Neighborhood Improvement Plan and have been asked to comment on the content of the plan for the benefit of the Task Force Members. First, I would like to thank the members of the Task Force team for their serious efforts and overall I was very pleased in the scope and detail of the plan. It is not unexpected that the results of the findings in the plan mirror the concerns that the administration has been dealing with. The one very large piece that has been missing from the efforts of the administration has unfortunately been a lack of citizen engagement in addressing the many issues that we are facing. We are all aware that the city has been addressing serious financial difficulties which have limited our ability to make corrections to the level that we would have preferred to accomplish. This task force and their efforts encourages me for the prospects for our future. If we can maintain a high level of citizen engagement in resolving issues, we stand a better chance of achieving success.

I have addressed each of the categories with a brief description of what we are currently doing to address the issue and comments on resources for expansion of those efforts.

**HARPER WOODS VALUES...BEAUTIFUL NEIGHBORHOODS**

1. **Holding landlords and property management companies accountable** – In 2013 we passed the first iteration of the Residential Income Property Ordinance. This ordinance is among the most detailed ordinances in affect and as we have progressed we have continued to amend it to improve on enforceability. We are currently conducted approximately 1300 enforcement actions on the rental ordinance annually. We have received a lot of pushback from certain landlords but through consistent enforcement we have been able to hold more of them to the higher standards that we require.

Unfortunately, these efforts are costly and we are currently maximizing the available revenues for this enforcement. The public can help us in these efforts by continuing to contact the Building Department whenever they believe that a rental unit is either not being maintained or is engaged in an activity that negatively effects the community. While our enforcement efforts are up we still find unregistered rentals every week so these notifications help us to track landlords who have failed to properly register their properties.

2. **Reducing Blight and Trash** – Blight and Trash come under the jurisdiction of both the building department and the Department of Public Works (DPW). We are currently enforcement blight under the state law through the International Property Maintenance Code which has been codified as a local ordinance. We are presently working on adopting the state blight law into ordinance and adding an administrative fee as well as the civil fines that are possible through court action. This would help us to fund continued and increased enforcement in these areas. Again, the assistance of the public through direct notifications assist us in this function. With

the building department currently handling over 5,500 incidents annually, each notification from the public helps us to keep on top of new violators. Trash should be reported to the DPW for disposition. The DPW staff was cut dramatically due to financial pressure and we went from 18 DPW employees down to 7. I have authorized the hiring of additional part-time employees to help us deal with the large number of complaints we are currently dealing with. At times, we are dealing with elderly home owners without the resources to take care of some of these problems and assistance from community groups would go a long way to improving that. We have organized several community clean ups particularly in the area of Kelly Road, we have had good response from employees and lately some community groups but more volunteers are needed. The city will be making a concerted effort in 2017 to address issues on Kelly Rd. We will be opening a Community development center located on Kelly and hope to have representatives from the city working out of that location to begin to reform the Kelly businesses through contact with owners, tenants, and new business startups. We will need volunteers to help us with this effort and will be soliciting from the community for that help. We will continue to look for grants and other financial means to accomplish improving this business corridor.

The trash routes are marked on the back page of each calendar and new residents are advised of this. We can post the pickup map on the city website reinforce when the pickups are scheduled. Currently, the city allows both bags and containers with the limitation being 30 gallon containers. We will be putting out a new RFP for trash pickup in September of 2018 and have been discussing the possibility of switching to the larger containers. This would require a significant contract change and unfortunately higher costs. Should we go this route the container would be required.

We are presently working on an improved citizen engagement tool that would assist residents in notifying the city and the appropriate department of problems of all nature. We will continue to search to find the most effective and affordable means of accomplishing this.

### **3. Reducing the number of vacant and abandoned buildings -**

In 2013, we passed the vacant/abandoned building ordinance to provide a mechanism for address the issue of these buildings. Enforcement of this ordinance has been spotty to date specifically due to lack of resources. To improve this enforcement, we have begun to use the abnormal water usage reports to identify properties that have zero water usage. This would help us to identify vacant property. Unfortunately, this is a moving target and a large task. At any given time 20% of the properties in Harper Woods are showing zero water usage. Verifying vacancy and identifying ownership are time consuming tasks. Assistance from the public can be a great asset is assisting with this endeavor.

The city places a strong preference for home ownership and as such for 2016 we started to take possession of tax foreclosed residences with the intent to repair and then to sell to home owners. This is a very intense and slow process that involves the courts, building department, use of private contractors, banks and our community development team. It also ties up what little available cash that we have on hand while we are working on development of these

properties. It is our intention to continue these efforts as long as we are financial able to do so. We have been meeting with banks and realtor groups on a regular basis to find means to improve practices that would allow more renters to become home owners. One of the largest issues is the inability of many renters to qualify for mortgages and especially small mortgages. Recently we have made headway with Fifth Third Bank who are creating new long products and other mechanisms to assist new home buyers qualify for loans. We are in discussion about the possibility of hiring professional assistance for public outreach to put word out on the advantages. Word of mouth is one of the best ways to communicate when a community is a good place to live. Public support in what is said about living in Harper Woods and correcting people you state obvious falsehoods about our community help to show our commitment. We need to be better at putting the positive message in the media than we are today.

#### **4. Property upkeep, beyond just cutting grass**

The administration couldn't agree more with the task force. We have been actively working on accomplishing this and have dramatically increased our efforts. From 2010 to 2014 the building department engaged in a total of 2,324 incidents. In 2015 and 2016 we did 10,972 and addressed all manner of property issues as stated above. Unfortunately, we are currently at our financial limit for staff and are unable to expand now. Citizen involvement may be of assistance to allow us to focus more on acute problems. The process of preparing violation, issuing violations, testifying in court is a time-consuming process that takes our enforcement team off the street. We also have become much more effective in maintaining complete records of each activity at our properties but that also takes more and more time to accomplish.

## **EDUCATION**

We share the concerns of the residents regarding education in the city and have developed close relationships with the administrations of both the Harper Woods and the Grosse Pointe school systems. We have an ongoing School Resource Officer program funded in part by federal grants and in part by the school system. Our police administration has worked closely with the schools on safety issues. The City has also assisted the schools with their extension outreach program through ATS. I do believe that volunteers and mentoring would be a great asset to assisting the schools in improving student performance. Another measure that could be provided by the residents would be greater participation in school events. In the events that I have attended I was shocked and the low rate of participation from parents.

## **CRIME REDUCTION AND LAW ENFORCEMENT**

### **1. Police Presence**

Maintaining police services has been one of the most intense concerns that we have been addressing. We are currently at the limit of staffing that our budget can absorb. The City maintains more staffing than any of the Grosse Pointe communities already. With only 4 million in tax revenues and over 4 million in public safety costs alone, we have been forced to use special assessments to be able to maintain the levels of service that we currently provide.

Patrol assignments cover the entire city and special emphasis is given to areas of the greatest activity. The computer mapping of police response clearly shows that every area of the city receives service. Eastland is a private entity with a responsibility to add their own security patrols. We do conduct routine patrols and respond to service requests daily. It may be a surprise to many that actual rates of crime at Eastland are very low, with more coverage needed for our south end of town than in the north end. That being said, the Director and I have routinely been going over ways to increase patrol presence. Visible police patrol acts as an insurance policy, where actual police activity often requires less visible presence and more covert presence. We have added state police patrol to Kelly road, we participate in undercover task forces that have been extremely successful in reducing certain crime events in the community. A case in point is the dramatic reduction in auto in the community.

I have spoken with the Director about having citizens become more aware of how successful our policing is and we will be working on getting citizens more involved so that they can become aware of all of the efforts that we have been taking.

## **2. Interaction and familiarity with officers**

Starting back in 2008 the police department started working on positive police contact with residents and each officer is responsible to daily contact residents during slow activity periods for a positive contact. We will continue with this program and will be looking to increase civilian interaction with the police in the future.

The Harper Woods Police Department works closely with the Detroit Police Department especially with their investigative services. We have little influence in their patrol routes, but constantly push for greater patrols and undercover presence on our borders. The Detroit Police Department is very understaffed and their response times still leave much to be desired. Our investigators do routinely meet with Detroit investigators on crime that affect our community.

## **3. Neighborhood Watch**

We have made efforts for years to try and get neighborhood watch programs organized. Watch programs are driven by citizens and supported by the police. We have officers available to help watch groups organize, but unfortunately our experience is that we have had great difficulty finding citizens who are will to devote the time and effort to organize the programs and maintain watch meetings and patrols. This really is an area that requires active citizen involvement to be successful.

## **4. Speeding on Residential Streets**

The police department regularly puts out traffic enforcement on residential streets and responds to citizen requests of speeding problems. The police department also puts out traffic counters on a regular basis to try and reduce speeding. Speed bumps are an extreme approach not usually supported by many residents and extremely costly to maintain, sign and install. The use of speed bumps on streets with speed limits of 25mph are counter indicated and not normally done. Discussion on this type of response should be done with the Deputy Chief in charge of patrol activity.

## **5. Greater enforcement of noise violations**

We respond to many noise complaint calls, but often lack complainants who are willing to proceed with being the complainant against their neighbors. A police officer's peace cannot be disturbed and while we will respond and do everything in our power to get the noise situation resolved, it often takes a complaint to have a successful prosecution.

#### **6. Enforcement of curfew**

The curfew laws are currently enforcement regularly by the police department within the limits of the existing ordinance. The police department has not at this point requested a modification of the ordinance requirements. It may be productive to receive recommendations to be sent to the ordinance committee to review the parameters of the existing ordinance and to make recommendations for revision.

### **COMMUNITY MINDEDNESS**

I do believe that this section and positive action to accomplish goals may be one of the most impactful on current conditions in the community. In reviewing the areas of concern that have preceded this section many of the issues would be improved by increased acts of good citizenship from our residents.

#### **1. Neighbors taking pride in their homes/neighborhoods**

I support the points made by the task force and the city could certainly assist in obtaining support materials. The missing piece are the resident's to led in pushing the initiative.

#### **2. Being respectful and considerate of neighbors**

We receive far too many complaints that are one neighbor not getting along with another. I must say that recommendations made by the city on what we "expect" from our residents are not often received well. Too often the city is viewed as an authoritarian agency and many take offense from suggestions made by city officials that residents are not behaving to the norm. I believe that the block captain and block meetings from residents who share an interest may be received better that the voice from on high dictating the 10 commandments of communal living.

#### **3. Increase in neighborhood unity**

Again, the administration supports this concept and would participate in providing resources. We do intend to keep and strengthen our relationship with the Detroit District 4 personnel.

#### **4. Introduction of a "Block Captain" model**

The city supports the Block Captain model, earlier recommendations were to name such people as Block Ambassadors for a softer title with much the same intent. Councilmember Kindle has been persistent in this type of outreach model and really all that is missing are those dedicated individuals willing to give of their time to accomplish the goals.

### **COMMUNITY EVENTS**

#### **1. Activities/events that make Harper Woods a destination**

The events that we currently offer are all employee driven. Cities that provide offerings such as farmer's market and festivals all need organizer volunteers to drive the event and make it happen.

A core of individuals willing to work on such projects would find that the city would offer as much support as possible. Funding such events is problematic, but with other city's what has occurred is that a fund is developed from the proceeds of successful events that helps to fund future events.

## **2. Optimized communication and promotion of currently well-loved events and attractions**

We do need to do a better job in this area and going back to a much earlier comment I believe that we need to start looking at retaining the use of a specialist in promotion for the entire city. If there are local persons who have skills in this area it may be cost effective, if they have the interest and the time, to engage local persons to assist in this endeavor.

## **3. Residents want a voice about what community activities are available.**

We have had a terrible time getting volunteers to our boards and commissions. I think that a task force is a great idea but we need the volunteers to make it happen. I am sure that members of Council would participate in this endeavor.

## **4. Activities for teens, seniors/"age-specific groups"**

What really is needed are groups to operate as organizers for these types of programs. We have programs offered by the city and programs offered by Society for Older Citizens (SOC) that serves our areas. In cities that run farmers markets and other market events they are often run by a DDA or by an outside citizen group. We would be happy to work with organizers that would like to bring these types of events to Harper Woods, but at present do not have the staff to run more programs than we currently do. The Target Night Out is funded by Target Corporation, who also assist us in organizing and advertising of the event.

## **5. Optimized communication and promotion of currently events**

As previously stated, I believe that the city has need for a public relations person to help with preparing and distributing promotional materials. Our current budget is only \$2,500 and that is spent in total each year. At the present time, financial resources are limited for this type of use.

## **6. Residents want a voice about what community activities are available**

As stated above we lack current resident input groups, we have a parks and recreation committee but it is always difficult to keep members and their current involvement is limited. A group of volunteers that meet regularly would definitely be an asset to begin working on this point.

## **7. Community recreation center**

We are very sympathetic to the desire for a community recreation center. We are in the early stage of having a new Recreation Master Plan completed. Once completed we would become eligible for application for federal grant dollars to assist us in such pursuits. We have attempted over the last five years to find private partners who would be willing to enter into a mutually beneficial arrangement to have a field house built at Salter Park. To date, we have had several that wanted to build a hockey rink but have been unable to find support for a field house. This is one area that we will continue to research for development.

## **FUNCTIONING INFRASTRUCTURE AND CITY SERVICES**

### **1. Kelly Road Redevelopment**

We share concerns regarding Kelly Rd. and it has been a major topic of discussion over the last year. Lack of funding has stopped any increase in activity in the area beyond what we have historically done. Through 2017 and 2018 we are going to be involved in a major push for community and economic development in the area. The city has acquired a building on Kelly Road through tax foreclosure. We are in the process of making improvements to the building and intend to use it temporarily as an outreach center for community development of the area. It is our hope to meet on a regular basis with owners and business owners to open discussions on improvements for the area. We are seeking to find ways to use CDBG funds to help with improvements and will be working with our planners on formulating a strategy to address issues on the street. Direct community involvement in the area would be a great asset on implementation of these strategies.

### **2. Redevelopment of Eastland Mall**

The City has been interacting with all the persons responsible for the mall and with potential investors. We are working with planners and consultants on the determining the best possible solutions and maximum involvement that the city can play in assisting with a redevelopment of the area. We will continue with these efforts and the assistance of community action will be a plus in making an impact in the area.

### **3. Public Transportation**

We already have a very good public transportation service for seniors and handicapped individuals that is being operated by the Society for Older Citizens. There is a current shortage of drivers and we have been advertising for people to apply for these positions. With more drivers, we can add additional routes to this service. We have been working with the 8 Mile boulevard association, Smart and DOT on improving the bus stops and improving routes in the area. Community support of the SOC transportation through PAATS will help with improving the service and increasing what has already proved to be a major asset for our community.

### **4. Lower taxes and utility costs**

We are constantly looking for ways to keep taxes and utility cost at their lowest possible points. Unfortunately, services cost money to operate. Our employees have done a great job in supporting maintenance of costs through benefit reduction and pay freezes. Our general employees have not had a pay raise in over 11 years and our public safety personnel have not had raises over the last six years. It is a constant battle to weigh demand for serviced against the cost for providing that service. We will continue to approach both of these areas with the upmost care with the emphasis of providing the most service at the lowest cost possible. Volunteerism to date has been low and hopefully that will improve allowing us to increase service to the community.