

Yarrow Brown: Utilize ARPA funds for strategic community impact

BY YARROW BROWN Local columnist Jan 2, 2022

It's important to recognize how amazing our community has been this past year, and to acknowledge its progress to remove barriers and find creative solutions to housing. It remains a key challenge and one we need continue to work together to solve. It involves us all — the private, public and nonprofit sectors.

There's still a long way to go, but we've have reached over 50 of our 139 local governments working to become more "housing ready" and offer attainable housing opportunities.

We provided advocacy training and helped two new housing action groups form and work toward a Housing Ready Program Director to bring more housing to their communities.

We've worked with our partners on important legislative changes through the state Senate.

Our voices are being heard in many sectors — even in Lansing where state agencies are considering more collaborative programs for rural communities.

There's still work to do. Our communities have been not fully housing ready and we need to be poised for new tools and incentives being deployed in other parts of the state.

The pandemic is something we never wished for and has impacted our communities.

But we have an opportunity that requires us to be collaborative and strategic with the American Recovery Plan Act (or ARPA) funds.

At Housing North, we have one focus — housing! Alongside our partners, we're working to remove barriers to housing in our 10-county region.

We know housing is connected to so many things — to childcare, wages, mental health and more.

Without a community that meets its housing needs, progress cannot truly be made.

Through our local Community Development Coalition, the Coalition for a Strong and Prosperous Michigan (<https://www.miroadmap.com/>) and our community, we can provide clear guidelines to our senators and representatives on how this ARPA funding can be its most impactful and leveraged to continue in perpetuity.

We can share strategic ways to utilize this funding to have a lasting impact in our region.



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In Northwest Michigan and other rural communities, we sometimes get lost in the shuffle with downstate areas and are often not eligible for incentives or programs for various reasons.

Our biggest fear at Housing North is that this money does not get set aside for communities like ours — places that do not have Community Development staff or walkability scores that make them competitive for programs, to provide support for developers and communities who want to provide attainable housing.

We live in a world where the average home prices are \$250,000, yet our average wages are below \$20 an hour.

If you make \$20 an hour and buy or rent a home considered “affordable” at 30 percent of your income, that’s \$1,000 a month or a home around \$165,000. It’s almost impossible to find a home at that price point.

We need more than 14,000 homes in our 10-county region in the next four years, the majority needed for people earning less than \$40,000 annually.

How can we assure there are enough homes for our year-round workers, many making \$20 an hour or less?

What’s our responsibility as community members, nonprofits, elected officials and businesses to ensure everyone has a home and it remains affordable long term?

We’re learning about opportunities to use ARPA funds for many programs and needs in our communities — including housing.

We’re confident these funds can be used to help with housing opportunities and create a revolving loan fund. Housing North is here to help communities invest in housing and housing programs.

The Michigan Municipal League coalition is working diligently to propose a plan to our state legislators. We encourage you to review this plan, join the coalition and reach out to your elected officials.

From what we understand, Michigan is behind many states in allocating ARPA funds. We need to make sure we seize the opportunity to collaborate and be strategic with these funds to meet our communities’ needs.

Through our local five-county Community Development Coalition, we know the top priorities are housing, youth mental health and childcare.

Let’s make sure these funds are used to move the needle on these priorities and make our communities stronger, more diverse and more resilient in the months and years ahead.

Please reach out to your elected officials and let them know you support this coalition and want ARPA funds directed towards programs that will impact Northwest Michigan. More information can be found on our website housingnorth.org or at mml.org.