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The Poor Will Always Be With Us – But Will They Be Allowed In New Berlin?

Two years ago, when New Berlin was in desperate need of non-contaminated drinking water, Mayor Jack Chiovatero wasted no time in reaching out to the City of Milwaukee to establish a regional partnership. He exhibited considerable energy and earnestness as he attempted to secure the best deal possible for his constituents. It is thanks to his efforts that current and future generations of New Berliners can rest easy knowing that they will be able to access Lake Michigan water for years to come.

I happen to be one of the few aldermen who voted against that water contract, because I thought Milwaukee could have gotten a better deal – perhaps one similar to Cleveland’s Lake Erie regional partnership with its suburban communities. Nevertheless, I came away from the process with great respect for the way “Mayor Jack” fought on behalf of New Berlin, relentlessly advocating for its future prosperity.

Part of our agreement for water required that New Berlin take a hard look at housing demographics and public transportation alternatives. As I have said on more than one occasion, any deal for Lake Michigan water is about more than mere H₂O; it’s about commercial, residential and industrial growth for an area that could not grow absent water. As that growth occurs, either better transportation connections are necessary to bring employees into the region or suitable residential options must be created to house them. Significant population growth requires one or the other – upgraded transit or more diverse housing.

Mayor Chiovatero and others had attempted to blend an element of “workforce” housing into the overall plan for New Berlin’s City Center. Those efforts should be commended. Rather than opening the floodgates for poor people to take over his city, I believe that the mayor was attempting to put New Berlin in the best position to prosper. Workers are simply part of the equation for any expanding municipality.

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After reading and hearing various perspectives from all over the region regarding New Berlin's affordable housing controversy, I am compelled to lend my voice to the discussion. As someone who grew up in public housing as a child and now spends a good deal of time analyzing prospective projects as an adult, I know a thing or two about the subject.

First, affordable housing is not code for slum, ghetto or crime. As chairman of the Housing Authority for the City of Milwaukee, I have read study after study on the relationship between crime and housing. Crime does not increase when affordable housing units are constructed. To the contrary, high-quality, affordable housing actually helps to lower crime in most cases. There is no reason to think that this type of housing would attract criminal activity in New Berlin.

Second, the strong subtext for those who harbor such assumptions is that low-income individuals and families are more inclined to commit crimes than to succeed in life. This is simply not the case. From Andrew Jackson to Abraham Lincoln to Barack Obama, the redemptive rags-to-riches story is not just for U.S. presidents – it is our national narrative. It is absolutely possible for people to move from affordable housing to middle-class housing to wealthy neighborhoods. In fact, it is commonplace in our country.

Third, and perhaps most important, the proposed housing component for City Center would target individuals and families with an income of \$35,000 per year, which cannot truly be categorized as low-income or poor. True, people who make \$35,000 per year are probably poorer than other residents in New Berlin, but college graduates, white-collar professionals, teachers and other strong contributors to society fall within that salary range. To say that this project will be a magnet for poor people is a gross misrepresentation of the facts.

To those New Berliners with anxiety about property assessments decreasing or criminal activity rising, I encourage you to maintain high standards for your neighborhoods and for your city. But I would also ask that you be open to making space for “non-wealthy” citizens who want to positively contribute to New Berlin's social fabric and local economy. Just because a person happens to have a little less money, doesn't mean that person is morally bankrupt.