

What kind of community do you want that would make your business successful?

Welcoming, clean, safe, thriving

Government services that are accessible, consistent, fair, with an orientation or attitude that promotes growth and problem-solving, rather than punishment and fine collecting

An environment that welcomes investment, rather than discourages investment and perpetuates blight

A city with good-paying jobs so people can afford to pay their rent

Given what you just said, what are the 2-3 most important issues or concerns as it relates to housing? Why?

An attitude of collaboration on how to cost-effectively refurbish homes and accomplish goals rather than an adversarial stance; a mutual desire to rebuild the housing stock and a helpful attitude to make that happen

Consistent, reasonable standards for older properties, with an emphasis on safety rather than complying with current code; easily accessible, clearly communicated, and easy to follow

What do you think is keeping us from the progress we want to see in housing?

The city demonstrates an adversarial orientation, poor customer service, and confrontational communication skills. Service is not friendly or helpful.

The department does not want to change. They have been told repeatedly that there are problems, and they have consistently refused to do anything about it.

The city appears to need the income from fines, and applies them with a heavy hand.

Findings are inconsistent from one inspector to another, one instance to another; they are reported slowly and inconsistently. Findings are sometimes baffling, and sometimes

unrealistic. The housing stock in Battle Creek is getting worse and worse because well-meaning individuals cannot afford to meet the city's unrealistic standards for older homes.

If a requirement seems erroneous, the appeals process is slow and difficult to navigate.

Inspectors set appointments, but show up early or late and inspect without the property owner in attendance. Resulting violations are unclear and excessive.

Inspectors can be aggressive about entering properties.

Inspectors insist on inspecting items beyond the permitted repair/improvement.

Inspectors make incorrect assumptions about violations, and won't remove those violations unless the owner pays a structural engineer to prove they were wrong. This can cost several hundred dollars, to accomplish nothing. (Saying an older home has "balloon construction" - the inspector just made up the violation and forced the home owner to pay a professional to prove it was not true.)

Inspectors site violations, and then site additional violations during the re-inspection.

Stop work orders are issued when the permit was pulled, but not processed through the city system.

Inspectors site the law violated, item is fixed by a licensed contractor, but an unlicensed inspector won't pass the finished repair.

Inspectors required an \$18,000 repair on a bank-repossessed house with a \$5000 market value while the property was being marketed.

The Rental Property Association has repeatedly asked for a checklist, similar to an FHA checklist or a Section 8 checklist, but no checklist has been provided.

Peeling paint requirements have been taken too far. The original intention was to protect children from lead contamination, which is a worthy goal, but too often, minor or inaccessible peeling paint causes unnecessary delays in approvals, without compromising the safety of future residents. A more balanced, reasonable approach that promotes safety, rather than cosmetics, is called for. Some smaller investors can

continue making repairs, but need the income to start flowing first.

Real estate agents call to check the status of a property, and find out later that the information given was incorrect or incomplete, and home buyers cannot get water service.

Investors verify a property is rent-certified, only to find out later that the property's occupancy permit has been pulled, and there are thousands of additional dollars necessary for occupancy, although the rent certification is in place.

When you think about what we've talked about, what are the kinds of things that could be done that would make a difference?

Train staff in friendly, helpful customer service. Inspectors arrive on time. Information given over the phone is accurate and reliable. Inspectors cross-reference so that a rent-certified property is also a habitable property.

Adopt a culture of "How can we help?" Approach investors and homeowners with "What is your goal? Here's how to get there..." (rather than, "Sorry – that's just the way it is...")

If a property is older, it should be required to meet the code for the time the house was built. Just because there is one violation or change, the entire house should not have to be re-worked to meet today's code. A reasonable checklist should be compiled for "grandfathered" housing, so a qualified individual could compare the list to the actual condition of a property and feel fairly confident on what would be required.

Licensed inspectors arrive with the check sheet, mark the items that need to be completed, and give the property owner the list right then. The same inspector returns upon completion, and checks to make sure those items are resolved. The inspector may not require additional repairs on the second inspection.

With an understanding that some older homes require judgment calls on safety issues, streamline the appeals process, maybe with a volunteer group.

Be a little more lenient on fines for garbage being out on the wrong day if tenants are

moving out.

Have the water department call when they are on their way, rather than giving a broad time window.

Thinking back over the conversation, what kinds of services do you think your city government could provide to make you and the community successful??

Provide a positive, helpful experience for those trying to upgrade the housing stock in Battle Creek.

Provide itemized checklists for occupancy and rent-certification requirements on older homes.

Allow owners to do their own repairs, as long as they are done correctly.

Point out what needs to be fixed and specify corrective actions.

Arrive with a work order, specifying what will be inspected. Mark the form on the spot, rather than taking things back to the office to be typed.

If we came back together in 6 months or a year, what might you see which would tell you that the things we talked about tonight were starting to happen?

There would be a proactive, written plan in place with a timeline for implementation. The plan would be accessible and updated regularly with progress reports.

The staff would be friendly and helpful.

The list of upgrades required on existing homes would be available and clear.

The city and property owners would have positive stories to tell.