

Extension Open House to Showcase County Programs

**William Meiners
Herald Correspondent**

In the real estate world, sellers hope potential buyers will walk into an open house and, like the thunderbolt of love at first sight, find their dream home. This coming Monday, an open house at the Gratiot County Michigan State University Extension Office is designed to highlight a slew of programs that community members may not be fully aware of.

The June 1 gathering, from 3 to 5 p.m. at 219 North State Street in Alma, is free and open to the public. Visitors can expect to dig their hands into some activities as they learn about partnership volunteer opportunities, as well as the many free programs that are made possible by an upcoming millage in August.

Ashley Foster, the office's 4-H coordinator, spoke with The Herald on Friday about the philosophy behind the open house and their goals to deepen community connections. "We often say that MSU Extension is the best-kept secret around," she said. "We have so many different types of experts who can connect with our community, but people sometimes don't know we're here."

Foster, who has been in her role now for just over a year, draws on a lifetime of 4-H experiences to enhance and provide some of those same programs for young people in Gratiot County. Yet from youthful collaborations designed to build leadership skills to initiatives that help older folks better understand everything from mortgages or healthier-eating strategies, the office offers something for all ages.

Two of Foster's colleagues, Monica Jean and Casey Zangrano, the field crops and swine educators, respectively, are knee deep in fields helping farmers negotiate the challenges of their livelihoods. Though just as they're situated in Gratiot County, they travel throughout the state to share their expertise.

Additionally, several MSU professionals who have offices in Lansing or in other districts will be on hand to speak to a variety of subjects that might be surprising to you. Soil experts can offer advice for anyone, including the backyard gardener. If you'd like to become more civically engaged, launch your own business, or learn new recipes, there's a well-formulated plan to help you get there.

In her own area, Foster points to building a 4-H program that had about 350 options a year ago to over 400 now. "My goal is to get the youth in our community to learn that 4-H isn't just for people living on farms," she said. "It doesn't have to be about animals."

To that end, Foster has helped establish a Pokémon program where kids try to catch these wild creatures, which are a bit like animals. It's all part of a "Beyond Ready" philosophy that allows children to have some fun while developing the skills that will serve them well in the future.

Just as the crafts, animal showings, and other 4-H activities helped Foster turn into a responsible adult, she suggests that those symbiotic relationships lead to growth. "Re-



The Gratiot County MSU Extension Office is holding an open house on Monday, June 1, from 3 to 5 p.m., at 219 North State Street in Alma.

search shows that 4-H participants are two times more likely to have the goal of being a leader," she said. "And they are two times more likely to report to living life with intentionality and purpose."

Children signing up for 4-H activities as young as four and five years old may spend up to 15 years involved in various programs.

That's a lot of experiential knowledge picked up by the time they turn 20. Along those lines, Foster is fostering better relationships with the County Fair For Youth, attending all of their monthly meetings. She and Jean have also made presentations at recent county commissioner meetings. All to simply build and spread the word.

Ashley Students Release Salmon into Maple River



Ashley Community Schools students release Chinook salmon into the Maple River after several months of classroom care through a Michigan Department of Natural Resources program.

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Students at Ashley Community Schools recently released 151 Chinook Salmon into the Maple River after spending months raising and caring for the fish as part of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources program.

The Salmon in the Classroom project, led by teacher Deann Smith, has been part of the district for the past five years and gives students hands-on experience with environmental science and aquatic ecosystems.

Every November, Smith and her students select approximately 150 eyed eggs, and as they hatch, students are responsible for tank maintenance, water quality control and fish care.

Throughout the school year, students test water conditions, clean tanks, feed and monitor development while learning about the Chinook Salmon life cycle and their role in Michigan's waterways.

Students release the salmon in late April and early May into a nearby river system where salmon were once commonly found. "It would be amazing to hear stories of them returning," Smith said.

Smith was inspired to bring the program

to Ashley Schools after attending the DNR Academy of Natural Resources Classic program for educators. The necessary equipment was generously donated by several local organizations, including the Lions Club, Ashley Sportsman's Club and the Marion Springs Conservation Club.

"I knew it was something our students needed to experience," she said. "Students are able to witness the beginning life cycle of the Chinook salmon and understand their place in our environment, and also why and how they arrived here in Michigan."

Smith further noted the hands-on nature of the project has helped engage students in ways traditional classroom lessons sometimes cannot.

"Many, if not all, thrive on the experience," she said. "Some may find it difficult to attend to traditional lessons, but these hands-on activities make it real and relevant."

In addition to the salmon project, Ashley students also participate in the DNR's SLIME extension program, which allows schools that have participated in Salmon in the Classroom for at least two years to study sea lamprey.

Unlike the salmon, the lamprey are not released back into the river.

HOUSING *continued from page 1*

A 2025 Region G Housing Needs Assessment completed by Bowen National Research estimated Gratiot County needed 1,456 for-sale units and 464 rental units in the next five years. The report also found the surveyed multifamily rental vacancy rate at 1.7 percent, below the 4 to 6 percent range generally considered balanced.

Local survey data also identified single-family four-bedroom, two-bathroom homes as a top need, according to Zehner.

The next step was finding places where homes could be built.

"I emailed township, city and village supervisors, and asked, 'Give me all of your infill lots,'" Zehner said. "Even if it's just a one-off house, they were interested in filling those."

Infill lots are vacant or underused parcels where roads, utilities and other public infrastructure are already in place. Zehner said that could lower costs for builders while helping communities reuse property inside existing boundaries.

Commissioner Steve Sopocy noted that dissolving old pre-plotted lots "such as those in Sickels" involves legalities that can complicate efforts to open land for new infrastructure. He also raised concerns about how

new housing could be added without pushing development farther into agricultural areas.

"We've got a lot of potential in this county to take a huge step forward in solving this problem... without expanding into virgin land," Sopocy said.

He referenced townships in his district - Elba, Fulton, Newark, New Haven, North Shade and Washington - as areas where additional housing could be useful.

Zehner told commissioners the developer has been encouraged by responsiveness. She said townships and county permit offices have been easier to work with than in some other areas, with fewer delays and "red tape" slowing the process.

Even with clear demand and land available, getting projects off the ground isn't always simple when it comes to financing.

"There's not many tools available for developers for just regular housing," Zehner said.

One possible solution is tied to a change in the law.

"What the state has done is they've allowed the brownfield program to be utilized for housing," Zehner said. "So we're working right now with our consultants to develop a housing TIF plan."

Public Act 90 of 2023 amended the Brownfield Redevelopment Financing Act to allow the tool to be used for qualified residential projects. Brownfields are often associated with contaminated or blighted property, but the law now allows the same tax capture structure to support certain housing development activities.

Under tax increment financing, or TIF, the current taxable value of a property serves as the base. When construction increases that value, some of the added tax revenue can be captured over time and used to reimburse eligible costs.

For housing, that can help close the difference between what it costs to build and what can be recovered in the local market.

Zehner said the developer sees a much lower return on investment north of Lansing. Her presentation cited returns closer to 3 percent in the region, compared with about 10 percent in the southern part of the state.

Sopocy asked whether communities could consider other residential options, including smaller site-built homes and accessory dwelling units, often called mother-in-law suites.

"I do think that those are creative ways that we can do it," Zehner said. "I know Breck-

enridge did some tiny homes... it was fairly recently and it was just allowed in a certain area with a special use permit so that they knew it couldn't be just anywhere... I think it worked fairly well, I think they rented pretty quickly."

GGDI is also reviewing best practices and model ordinances that could help local governments consider similar residential options.

Zehner said solving the housing shortage extends beyond construction. Child care access and workforce development are closely tied to the effort, with GGDI supporting initiatives like the Gratiot Young Professionals Network, Leadership Development Workshops and Mid-Michigan 40 Under 40 as part of a push to recruit and retain talent in the county.

Sopocy tied new construction to population and tax base concerns, noting communities need housing that keeps residents local rather than adding units without retaining people.

"I want them to live here. I want them to pay taxes here. I want them to spend their paycheck here at our businesses and restaurants and gas stations and stores. That's what builds our community," he said.