

Ann Arbor

# Ypsilanti Township hires new attorney to handle Justice Department housing investigation



Ponds of Lakewood off Textile Road near the intersection with Tuttle Hill Road. (Dominic Valente | The Ann Arbor News)



By **Tom Perkins** | **Special to The Ann Arbor News**

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Ypsilanti Township has hired an attorney to handle a Justice Department **investigation over allegations of housing discrimination** that stem from rules the township put in place **to limit Section 8 and rental housing**.

## YPSILANTI NEWS

The rules, developed last year, immediately caught the attention of the Fair Housing Center in Ypsilanti, which filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The Justice Department separately opened its own investigation.

At its regular May 17 meeting, the Ypsilanti Township Board of Trustees unanimously approved hiring the Plunkett Cooney firm, which practices in Ohio, Indiana and Michigan. The township will pay the attorneys between \$180 and \$225 an hour.

Clerk Karen Lovejoy Roe praised the township's regular attorney, McLain and Winters, which drafted the agreement's language. But she said Plunkett Cooney specializes in land use questions, will handle a possible legal challenge of the township's new sign ordinance and

may be called upon for other issues on the horizon.

"We're not specialists on land policy issues and these are people who are," Roe said. "(McLain and Winters) is good, they know the history, but we haven't done anything like this recently."

As part of the development agreement written for the 392-unit Majestic Lakes subdivision unanimously approved by the Board in September, subsidized housing is barred, the number of rentals is limited, and the length of time single-family homes can be rented is capped at three years.

The rules are part of a **broader township effort** to increase home ownership and reduce the number of rentals. According to its data, the township experienced a spike in the number of rentals and section 8 housing during the recession, and officials say that's the source of a disproportionate amount of their crime and blight-related issues.

Pam Kisch, director of the Fair Housing Center, previously told The Ann Arbor News that the agency filed a Fair Housing Act complaint with HUD in January over the section 8 rules and other township housing policies.

Kisch charged the policy disproportionately impact minorities, women, disabled residents and women with children - all groups protected under the Fair Housing Act.

Aside from concerns over the section 8 and rental rules, the Fair Housing Center HUD complaint includes concerns about the township's and Sheriff's Office policy of alerting landlords or MSHDA if a tenant is involved in criminal activity or has "behavioral issues." That can result in the resident losing a housing voucher or other assistance. The township and Sheriff's Office also pressure landlords into evicting tenants viewed as a problem, the Fair Housing Center charges.

Kisch said the policies are a concern because other factors often play into the situations, and there may be better responses.

The Fair Housing Center and ACLU of Michigan met with Sheriff Jerry Clayton's office regarding the concerns. Both sides previously said the meetings were positive, and Sheriff Clayton said his office is re-examining how it handles situations that involve low-income housing residents.

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