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ADVOCATES FOR HOMEOWNERSHIP BY PROMOTING STANDARDS FOR QUALITY AND AFFORDABILITY

Muscatine County Board of Supervisors
414 E. 3rd St. Suite 101
Muscatine, IA 52761

March 27, 2020

Dear Chair Jeff Sorensen and Muscatine County Board of Supervisors:

On behalf of The Greater Iowa City Area Home Builders Association (IC Area HBA) and the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), we write to urge you to consider policy proposals to support the housing sector of the economy during the COVID-19 pandemic. IC Area HBA's members stand with you during these uncertain times and look to your leadership to help steer the community through uncharted waters. To help stabilize the housing sector in the near term, we ask you to designate home construction as an "Essential Infrastructure Business" in Johnson County.

A federation of more than 700 state and local associations, NAHB represents more than 140,000 members. Each year, NAHB's members construct about 80% of the new homes built in the United States, both single-family and multifamily. The IC Area HBA represents 357 members with 15,474 employees.

As cities and states issue declarations and public health orders as a result of the crisis, it is essential that communities have access to our professionals to build and maintain essential services including: building, plumbing, electrical, HVAC systems, waste/wastewater treatment plants and power generations. Home construction should be designated as "essential" because it is necessary to maintain safety, sanitation, and economic security.

We encourage you to consider four main factors:

- Recognize that construction of housing is essential and should be allowed to continue under a remain in place order;
- Government functions related to the building and development process, such as inspections, permitting and plan review services can be modified to protect the public health, but fundamentally should continue and serve the construction of housing (E.g., Allow qualified private third-party inspections in case of government shutdown);
- Supply stores necessary to serve the construction, repair and maintenance of housing should be allowed to operate; and

- Those working in building trades must be allowed to continue to maintain the essential operation of residences and other operating businesses.

Our industry continues to adhere to public health guidelines set forth by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

According to OSHA, “Lower exposure risk (caution) jobs are those that do not require contact with people known to be, or suspected of being, infected with SARS-CoV-2 nor frequent close contact with (i.e., within 6 feet of) the general public. Workers in this category have minimal occupational contact with the public and other coworkers.” Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19, p.20.

A large majority, if not all land development and residential construction job tasks fall within OSHA’s Lower Exposure Risk jobs. Obviously, working on a new unfinished home site occurs primarily outdoors and does not involve going onto a location occupied by residents or a public location, and there is minimal (if any) physical or transactional contact with customers compared to other customer/client relationships.

Homebuilding (including remodeling and repair) is highly regulated and therefore cannot occur without support from the locality where it occurs. Builders require governmental approvals and permits to begin a project and they are needed through project completion. Therefore, governmental inspections occur along the entire process from the land development to final certificate of occupancy.

As part of the Essential Infrastructure, residential construction requires that government building and zoning departments continue to operate. Furthermore, for the safety and wellbeing of current and future occupants, governments must allow inspections to occur in a timely manner.

The inspection process may benefit from modifications. For example, if possible, inspectors may work “off hours” to minimize any contact with the construction team. Or they can make other arrangements with the owner or general contractor to safeguard their health by ensuring nobody will be on site during an inspection. Furthermore, certain localities use third-party engineers to sign off on inspections. It may be necessary for home builders to request this option if local governments are closing their building department during the pandemic.

Housing is currently 14.6% of Gross Domestic Product and a major engine of the economy. Keeping the men and women of the industry building must be a priority. If construction is disrupted, it creates a domino effect leading to dire negative economic repercussions for an already-burdened economy.

We request that you consider construction an essential service, so that individuals may continue to perform work necessary to the operations and maintenance of “Essential Infrastructure.” We appreciate your leadership and the work of your staff and those who are spending every waking hour keeping us safe.

Sincerely,

Glenn Siders

President

The Greater Iowa City Area Home Builders Association