

DOUGLAS FARMER

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LA CROSSE, WI 54601

April 2, 2011

Dear Neighbor:

I have enjoyed serving as your council member. The real satisfaction does not come in the meetings (late) or the debates (endless). The real satisfaction has always been when you have a specific problem: a zoning question, a business operating in the neighborhood illegally, a house with possible drug activity, or something else important to you, and you give me the chance to help unravel the mysteries of City Hall.

On April 5, Election Day, we again find ourselves determining what our neighborhood will look like. My opponent in this election is Michael Stolpa, whom I do not know and have never met. According to Western Connect, April 2009, the alumni magazine for Western Technical College (he and I have that in common), he is the owner of Coulee Region Rentals, LLC. Records filed at the State of Wisconsin confirm that he was indeed the licensed agent for Coulee Region Rentals until the start of this campaign when it was re-registered with his wife as the agent.

As such, he is the third "landlord" opponent in as many elections. One shouldn't be surprised. Perhaps the proudest moment of my City Hall career occurred when Council member Dorothy Lenard referred to me as "Mr. Neighborhood". (I called her to ask her if she remembered that night, and her response was a very generous "Go ahead and use it." I thank her.)

I don't want to be unfair to landlords. Betsey and I are landlords, owning the duplex that "sits" in our backyard. Like many other people, we had to make this unwanted investment or move. It hasn't been all bad, to my four sons, I always have been able to say "go do such and such at the duplex." Work never hurt anybody.

Regrettably, my seemingly simple solution will not work elsewhere. The City of La Crosse has the third highest rate of rental concentration in the State of Wisconsin, at 49.1 percent of all housing units. Amazingly, only Madison and Milwaukee beat us at 52.3 percent and 54.7 percent respectively. All the other college towns – Stevens Point, Oshkosh, Eau Claire – trail us significantly. The statewide average is only 31.6 percent. Whatever the reason for this concentration, it is who we are and we need to address it.

This concentration of rental units alters our community. We were all renters once, my wife and I frequently think back to our "honeymoon cottage" on Jackson Street. Yet, as I go door to door, I am reminded once again, I can almost always tell whether a house is owner occupied, or a rental, from the sidewalk. Too often, it is pretty obvious.

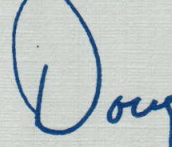
Not only is this a burden to our neighborhoods, but if allowed to continue, it will result in the deterioration of our tax base and the City of La Crosse will look more and sound more like the cities of Madison and Milwaukee. Those are problems we neither need nor want.

The concentration of rental units is also a public health and safety issue. Incredibly, according to the La Crosse Fire Department, the rental units are responsible for a staggering 60-65 percent of the fires annually. The records of the La Crosse Police Department are not as easily analyzed (there are more arrests than fires), but they assure me that when their analysis is complete, the percentage of drug arrests occurring in rental units will exceed the Fire Department's 60-65 percent.

This issue is going to require the steadfast attention of our city leaders for some time to come. I wish the most recent efforts about landlord licensing, rental inspection, improved zoning, multi-unit design standards and more recently, ordinances to better protect our single family neighbors from "quickie" rental conversions, will be a cure. They won't be. This problem took a long time to develop, and will take some time to solve.

I would appreciate your vote in the Election on April 5, 2011.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Doug". The signature is stylized with a large, circular initial "D" and a cursive "oug".

Douglas L. Farmer

P.S. To answer the question from all of you who have watched my family grow up. Yes, our oldest son, his wife and two children, after 10 years in Saint Paul, have bought the house 50 feet to the north of us. There is one neighbor in between (she is a saint). Further proof that La Crosse is a great place to live and our neighborhood is a good place to raise a family.