

Breaking barriers: Dana Watson's journey as the second black woman on East Lansing City Council

By **Audrey Pelzek** | April 15, 2024

Council member Dana Watson is the second black woman to ever serve on the East Lansing City Council. She was appointed in 2020, and is currently serving her four-year term.

One key focus for Watson is to influence and promote inclusivity.

Being on council is a taxing responsibility, given that it takes up many hours of the day. The pay is \$10,000 a year. Some of the city council meetings can run from 7 p.m. and can last until well past midnight.

During the day, Watson works in public health as the health equity and social justice coordinator at the Ingham County Health Department.

As a co-parent of three teenagers, this is not something that Watson likes about being a council member. However, there are some topics that she feels strongly about, and as a community activist, she feels it is one of her duties to fulfill.

“We have these overlay districts in our community... there's a [district] coming back in and it's going through the commissions,” Watson said. “It's been a great learning lesson to understand overlay districts, to understand the rules.”

Overlay districts are parts of the community that have rental homes, something that is an important issue to bring up in a college town.

Watson in general finds her allies and talks to people to understand the issues at hand, and why overlay districts are important, as well as keeping in contact with constituents.

This is not the only difficult issue that Watson has had to deal with while serving her term. As a voice for the black community, she feels it is important to bring inclusion to city councils' attention.

Gender inclusive language is something that she feels is important to our community. She has recognized that voices were left out of the conversation pertaining to language used in documents for the city.

Landon Bartley, Principle Planner of the Historic District Commission motioned to propose an amendment that would allow the City to replace any known lead and or galvanized water services in specific areas.

Watson brought up including gender inclusive language, Anthony Chubb, city attorney, denied the friendly motion on a technical act.

“We shouldn’t just have a his/her reference if we’ve got other people who identify in different ways,” Watson said. “There’s ways to be gender inclusive with our language, I’m actually saddened.”

There have been deeds written into homes and some of them made it so you couldn’t sell your home to a LGBTQ+ person and/or black people. This was something that was really hard to get to go away, and it is something that Watson stands for.

Her goal is to make sure that no one gets left out of any bills or amendments, and this is something she worked on with the housing deeds.

This aligns with the idea that gender inclusive language should be used in our documents, just to make sure that everyone has a voice that represents them.

“As the population base of blacks increases the inequity of representation increases,” according to Delbert Taebel author of Minority Representation on City Councils: The Impact of Structure on Blacks and Hispanics.

As a black woman, the importance of inclusion is something that she is thinking about when serving on the council. Coming from a redlined neighborhood south of Chicago, she grew up seeing inequity and it is something that strives to overcome with her time on the East Lansing City Council.

“Caring about the community, my involvement, our voice, our representation,” said Watson. “I owe this to the community to be the representative, but some days, it feels like, do I really belong here, is this our home?”

