

Michigan targets urban blight

Benton Harbor among areas sought for revitalization.

By VINCE BOND JR. *Capital News Service*

LANSING -- Time could be running out for abandoned and dilapidated homes plaguing the property values of some Michigan neighborhoods.

The Michigan State Housing Development Authority is seeking \$290 million from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for its New Michigan Urban Neighborhood plan targeting the 12 largest municipalities, including Lansing, Detroit, Highland Park, Grand Rapids and Kalamazoo.

Others target areas are Pontiac, Wyandotte, Hamtramck, Battle Creek, Flint, Saginaw and Benton Harbor.

The projects would revitalize neighborhoods by renovating or demolishing abandoned houses while improving the potential for private businesses looking to open shops in thriving areas, Rick Ballard, director of the MSHDA office of community development, said.

If the plan is funded, about 6,000 abandoned, foreclosed or vacant properties will be acquired and redeveloped, 2,500 structures will be torn down, and 1,500 homes will be built or rehabilitated. The housing authority is one of hundreds of applicants in the United States hoping to grab a piece of HUD's \$1.93 billion Neighborhood Stabilization Program.

MSHDA already is distributing \$174 million in federal stimulus funds from the first round of the stabilization program's awards among 44 cities, but that isn't enough money to "make sufficient investments and change the market perception" in those areas, Ballard said.

"They not only decrease the value of homes around them, but they also create the perception that the neighborhood doesn't have a future when it does. They also attract vandalism, scavengers and people who aren't a part of the neighborhood or aren't interested in it," Ballard said. "This would be a huge boost for our cities."

Under the plan, Detroit would receive the largest chunk with \$52.8 million, Lansing would get \$22.5 million, Grand Rapids \$20.1 million and Pontiac \$18 million.

Eric Schertzing, chair of the Ingham County Land Bank, said his agency has worked hard to foster a productive relationship with city governments, especially Lansing. The bank currently has 150 homes in its inventory and plans to renovate at least 50 of them next year.

In the past two years, the Ingham bank has sold 27 homes, Schertzing said.

"The partnership is extremely strong," Schertzing said. "We have worked with Mayor Virg Bernero's administration to return as many properties as we can to productive use."

Counties with land bank authorities, including Wayne, Ingham, Berrien and Calhoun, will work with local governments to identify problem areas organize projects.

Ballard said land banks and city governments are forming these partnerships so that redevelopment efforts are targeted and focused. "Land banks can maintain or demolish properties. They just need to figure out which neighborhoods are strategically important," Ballard said. "Land banks are there to maintain, reassess and facilitate reinvestment."

If the state isn't awarded the funds, Ballard said county land banks and local governments would continue to work with whatever money is available.

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