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## \$4 million will help demolish 740 houses in Dayton, county

LOCAL NEWS | Oct 21, 2016

By Cornelius Frolik

The wrecking ball awaits a couple hundred more decrepit homes in Montgomery County after new state funding.

The Montgomery County Land Bank has been awarded \$3.8 million in federal Hardest Hit funds through the state's Neighborhood Initiative Program, which is expected to help remove about 240 properties.

The allocation is on top of an \$8 million award to the land bank announced in July for blight elimination that seeks to stabilize property values neighborhoods and prevent the spread of foreclosures and home abandonment.

“Our community really needs this ... I view blight as a cancer on neighborhoods,” said Carolyn Rice, chair of the Montgomery County Land Bank.

The funding will allow the land bank to acquire and remove dilapidated structures and maintain the vacant lots.

Across the state, the land bank received the second largest increase in Neighborhood Initiative Program funds, behind only the Cuyahoga County land bank.

Land bank officials anticipate that the original allocation combined with the new funding will result in the elimination of about 740 abandoned and vacant homes. On average, it costs about \$16,000 to acquire demolish blighted structures in the county.

Abandoned and decaying structures drag down property values in local neighborhoods, negatively affect residents' quality of life and discourage people from investing in their homes and buildings, said Rice.

Blight also attracts criminal activities, such as vandalism and arson, which ties up public safety resources and makes neighborhoods unsafe, she said.

Dayton, which will receive the lion's share of the funding, has already started identifying additional properties to put into the foreclosure pipeline, said Aaron Sorrell, Dayton's director of planning and community development.

The city was budgeted about \$5.1 million from the last round of funding, which should cover the cost of removing about 311 homes. The city could receive about \$2.4 million of the new money to level about 150 more homes. Ownership of the targeted properties is one requirement of the state program.

Since the beginning of the year, city has eliminated 244 blighted and fire-damaged properties, including 111 through the land bank program.

But Dayton is still home to about 6,000 vacant homes, buildings, garages and other structures.

Additionally, more than 80 percent of Dayton residents want the city to demolish more structures than it currently does, according to a recent citywide survey.

Residents want conditions to improve in their neighborhoods, and demolition is among the most obvious ways to stabilize neighborhoods given that eliminating eyesores greatly improves the landscape, Sorrell said.

Studies indicate that blighted and empty structures within 500 feet of an owner-occupied residences negatively effect property values, the state says.

Dayton's blight problem, however, is a long time in the making and could take years to get under control — maybe longer — depending on funding, he said.

"It comes down to resources," he said, adding that it is unclear whether there will be more state and federal funding for demolition after this program concludes.

The local housing market is getting stronger as more eyesores are plucked away, and investors once again are buying up distressed properties to rehabilitate and return to productive use, said Mike Grauwelman, executive director of the Montgomery County Land Bank.

The Neighborhood Initiative Program focuses on eliminating troubled properties in neighborhoods that are in decent shape but are at risk of deteriorating if the blight is not contained, he said.

“It’s a very important program,” he said.