

# Residents call for aid in vacant home demolition

It is community's top priority for \$138M in fed funds, city survey says.



*Velma Morning, 87, and Angela Glover, 55, on the porch of their home on Oxford Avenue. They say their neighborhood is full of vacant homes that attract drug activities and illegal dumping.*



*Residents want the city to make vacant home demolition the community's highest priority for Dayton's \$138 million in federal rescue funds.*

*CORNELIUS FROLIK PHOTOS / STAFF*

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## ONLY IN THE DAYTON DAILY NEWS

Residents want the city to make vacant home demolition the community's highest priority for Dayton's \$138 million in federal rescue funds, according to a city survey, even though right now the money cannot be put toward this use.

However, city leaders and officials have asked the U.S. Treasury to make blight removal an eligible expenditure, as well as property acquisition, community infrastructure investments, construction of public safety facilities, sidewalk improvements and brownfield cleanup.

Dayton has one of the highest housing unit vacancy rates among urban areas in the state, and many neighbors are fed up with eyesores and blight in their neighborhoods.

"They are all over the place — this area is nothing but vacancies," said Velma Morning, 87, after pointing to multiple vacant properties surrounding her

home in the Southern Dayton View area.

“It’s a mess. ... They need to get them out of here.”

Dayton will receive \$137.97 million in American Rescue Plan Act funding that Congress approved to help communities recover from the COVID-19 crisis.

Dayton leaders have said this is the largest grant in the city’s history and the community will help decide how to spend this “once-in-a-lifetime” infusion of federal funds.

More than 1,700 people filled out a survey that the city published online in late spring and distributed in paper form during seven community listening sessions.

The survey asked community members to rank a variety of activities and investments as high, moderate, somewhat or low priority, or not a priority at all.

Nearly 61% of respondents said that demolition was a high priority, according to the survey results, and another 22% said it was moderate priority.

Less than 7% of people said demolition was not a priority or a low one.

Another top concern was addressing housing: Nearly half of respondents said this was a high priority, while nearly 27% said it was a moderate priority.

Investments in public safety also are important to community members: 45% said funding for fighting crime and crime deterrence was a high priority, and another 26% said it was a moderate priority.

Less than one-third of respondents said sidewalk repairs and replacement and investments in city facilities were high priorities.

Support for Black and brown businesses was a high priority for about 42% of community members and about 39% identified support for small businesses the same way.

Demolition of blighted properties right now is not one of the explicit permitted uses of the federal rescue funds under the U.S.

Treasury's interim final rule.

Qualifying expenses include supporting public health expenditures, replacing lost public sector revenue, providing premium pay for essential workers, addressing negative economic impacts of the coronavirus crisis and investing in water, sewer and broadband infrastructure.

But in mid-July, Dayton Mayor Nan Whaley and City Manager Shelley Dickstein sent a letter to the Treasury urging the department to expand eligible uses to include blight removal, sidewalk repairs and replacement, property acquisition and community infrastructure.

Whaley and Dickstein also requested the Treasury to allow rescue funds to be spent on brownfield remediation, construction of public safety facilities and investments in recreational amenities and the redevelopment of business districts impacted by COVID-19.

"While these funds and the eligible uses are a good start, we believe in several areas, they are too restrictive or do not acknowledge all the possible areas a community could benefit from aid in responding to the negative economic impacts of the pandemic," their letter states.

Dickstein recently said the city does not know for sure when the Treasury will issue final funding guidance but it could happen this fall.

A variety of other communities and organizations, such as the Ohio Mayors Alliance, also submitted very similar comments to the Treasury that ask for demolition, property acquisition and community infrastructure to be added to the list of qualifying expenses.

In a letter signed by Mayor Whaley, the U.S. Conference of Mayors asked the department to expand qualifying uses beyond direct assistance to include investments that help improve the "built environment."

Whaley is the president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, and the organization's letter is very similar to those submitted by the city of Dayton and the Ohio Mayors Alliance.

Dayton is home to more than 11,000 vacant housing units — or about one-sixth of the city's housing supply, according to this newspaper's analysis of

once-in-a-decade decennial Census data.

Dayton has the third highest housing unit vacancy rate in the state among cities with at least 10,000 residents.

Only East Cleveland and Sandusky have higher rates.

Dozens of people who completed the city's survey submitted written comments asking for vacant and blighted homes in their neighborhoods to be bulldozed or rehabilitated.

"There are houses on my block that have been vacant 18 years," wrote one respondent.

"These homes need to come down."

A city analysis found that nearly one-quarter of written comments on the surveys mentioned housing.

Morning said she has lived on Oxford Avenue for about five years and she's complained to the city multiple times about vacant homes on her block and overgrown vegetation surrounding them.

She said overgrown shrubs and bushes block her view of an abandoned home across the street, meaning she can't easily see when trespassers enter the home who undoubtedly are up to no good.

Morning, a retired GM worker, said she wishes the city would tear down the vacant homes on her block because they attract drug use and illegal dumping.

"If you get these buildings down, that would be a blessing," she said.

The neighborhood would be really nice if there was less drug activity, illegal dumping and fewer vacant and decaying homes, said Angela Glover, who lives with Morning.

'There are houses on my block that have been vacant for 18 years.

These homes need to come down.' One response to the city of Dayton's survey