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I-TEAM REPORT

Trotwood strategy: rehab houses

16 properties targeted in effort to stabilize neighborhoods.

By Jim Otte

Staff Writer

TROTWOOD — While some cities have been tearing down as many abandoned houses as possible, Trotwood has taken a different path in an effort to stabilize its neighborhoods: redevelopment.

The Trotwood Community Improvement Corporation has targeted 16 properties for redevelopment, according to executive director Norm Essman.

“We do not view it as saving houses as much as we are saving neighborhoods,” Essman said. “When you tear down a house facing a block in a neighborhood it is like a smile missing a tooth. We try to do anything within reason to save that block face.”

CIC records indicate three properties already have been sold to owner-occupants. Three others were sold to private developers and the remainder are in various stages of repair or pending sales.

The process begins with the CIC obtaining title to the properties from Montgomery County following an expedited tax foreclosure. Back taxes are wiped out and the properties are either redeveloped by the CIC or made available to an outside developer.

“That allows us a fresh, clean start and allows us to put a new owner in it that’s going to pay taxes and enjoy living in our neighborhoods,” Essman said.

A single-story brick home built in 1957 at 909 MacMillan Street is the CIC’s latest property to be totally rehabbed and placed on the market for \$77,500. It sports a new kitchen and bath, two-car garage and a quarter-acre lot.

City Manager Mike Lucking said the process takes the property far beyond the simple flip with a coat of paint. In most homes, floors and roofs are among the upgrades.

“Our housing stock lends itself to that type of renovation,” Lucking said. “We have some beautiful houses in Broad-moor, Old Town, Westbrooke Village where we have done that. They are brick structures and good candidates for rehab.”

Trotwood’s drive to renovate rather than remove houses has the support of neighbors who have watched empty homes begin to fall apart. Willie Tyson, 89, lives two doors down from a CIC house undergoing renovation at 307 Beardsley Road.

“A lot of these (empty) houses belonged to people who worked at GM and Delphi and lost them after the employers left town,” Tyson said.

The real estate bust over the past 10 years has pushed the value of Tyson’s house down by 50 percent. He hopes the newly renovated house on the block will help property values rebound.

“It would be nice if we could go back to when we first moved here 35 years ago,” Tyson said.

The city is well aware of the speculative nature of the renovate-rather-than-demolish strategy. Should another housing crisis strike, they and partnering private developers could be stuck with properties.

“In all sincerity, what choice does the city have when our neighborhoods are deteriorating?” Essman said. “If you tear them down they are gone forever. If you fix them up and have to hold them for a while it’s only a cost issue and we still have good housing stock and good neighborhoods.”

Other cities have taken on individual properties for renovation, but Trotwood is the only local city to take the effort to the next level, according to Montgomery County Treasurer Carolyn Rice.

Rice said the key to success begins with the county’s expedited foreclosure process that allows the city to obtain control of vacant properties faster than traditional court proceedings .

“Due process is still intact, so owners are notified and given a chance to respond,” Rice said. “These are vacant and abandoned properties, and in most cases they will not have an interested party step forward to address the situation.”

She applauded Trotwood for taking on the housing issue.

“We have a tremendous crisis in our community. When it is targeted in a community like it is in Trotwood, you hope that it will start the spark of people being able to see a future for this neighborhood.”

Not all troubled properties can be saved. Trotwood plans to demolish about 30 houses this year, on par with each of the past five years. The city estimates that it has 150 vacant properties in the pipeline, inching toward demolition.

Springfield plans to tear down 27 structures this year, according to community development director Shannon Meadows. She would like to do more, but funds are limited.

“It’s a constant battle of leveraging funds. In the city of Springfield we will leverage state, federal and local funds to address the problem as best we can,” Meadows said.

Dayton plans to tear down 270 homes over the next two years. Kevin Powell, acting housing inspection manager, said funding is the major constraint in Dayton, leaving thousands of dilapidated properties standing empty, often invaded by squatters and scrappers.

“We estimate that we have 6,500 structures that have to be torn down,” Powell said. “That includes commercial properties, industrial properties, residential properties, and garages.”

State and federal funding for demolition is available through next year, but Powell said after that funding is uncertain.

Renovation efforts in Trotwood are designed to be largely self-supporting through the sale of properties the city acquires. Essman said the CIC has managed to make a modest profit of about \$15,000. It has come, though, after much time, effort and a learning curve for the staff.

“It’s been, I don’t want to say a difficult program to get underway, but I think a pioneering program that has taken a lot of twists and turns and we’re happy we got into it,” Essman said.



This house at 8 W. Worley Ave. in Trotwood sold for \$12,145 in 2011. The Trotwood Community Improvement Corporation took possession of the property last year and sold it to a developer who is renovating the property. **BYRON STIRSMAN / STAFF**



Michelle Thrasher, a supervisor for S and S Improvements, works at a house in Trotwood that is being redeveloped by the Trotwood CIC. **BYRON STIRSMAN / STAFF**