

Deconstruction program combats county's blight

By CHARLIE BAN
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Looking at the more than 70,000 blighted buildings throughout the Detroit area, Wayne County realized there were valuable building materials inside many of them, and outright demolition might not be the right answer.

Instead, careful deconstruction could not only mean a new source of building materials, but also a revenue source and an employment opportunity for more than 80 people who would be deconstructing 100 homes over two years.

"We wanted to be able to focus on sustainability and job development with a possibility of creating a back-end market for materials," said Ann Leen, the county's deputy director of community development. "We wanted to jump on the (sustainability) bandwagon but we realized

pretty quickly that there was no bandwagon, we would be driving it."

Deconstruction involves the deliberate disassembly of a structure, with an eye to salvaging as much reusable building materials as possible.

The county used stimulus money from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to fund the project and committed two years and \$1.9 million to what became known as the Neighbor-

hood Stabilization Deconstruction Program (NSDP), starting in March 2012. There was a ready contingent of trained deconstruction workers living in Wayne County, with 290 who were unemployed when the NSDP started. Leen said the big step came in pairing job sites with the workers' addresses, reducing the barrier to employment that comes with the distance to a job.

"We looked at maps where people could walk to work and it seemed like a win-win," she said. "They're already trained and ready to work, they can remove blight in their neighborhoods and it could become a full-community engagement effort."

The program relies of neighborhood residents to keep an eye on houses that have made it past the site selection stages and are awaiting deconstruction because fire-damaged houses are immediately eliminated because of lead and asbestos concerns and squatters could introduce biohazards into a structure.

"There are a few times we've put a lot of work into making sure we have a good property that is ready to go and we show up and it had burned to the ground," Leen said. "We impress upon the neighbors to let us know if something is up in the property, to call the police."

"One of the biggest challenges is that often the most blighted houses out there aren't right for our needs. They're too damaged and dangerous."

Site selection is driven by the level of blight in a community, amount of cooperation with property owners and the available workforce. Reports from the Safe Routes to School partnership helps target areas where children are exposed to the dangers that accompany blight. That has meant a lot of deconstruction in the Highland Park section of the county.

"You have to look at it with a community perspective; you can show up with a bulldozer for a demolition and be done in two days, but that's not what this is intended to do," Leen said. "This comes down to people improving their neighborhood and doing something productive with the materials they recover."

Deconstruction takes roughly two weeks per house, and has yielded lumber and bricks among other materials. Leen said crews typically recover 70 percent of original building materials.

That thrills Lisa Grace, the development director for EcoWorks, which runs Reclaim Detroit, a southeast Michigan deconstruction organization that markets the materials wholesaler.

"The materials you can get from these houses are extremely



Photo courtesy of Wayne County, Mich.

Deconstruction crews carefully salvage reusable building materials from vacant houses in Wayne County, Mich.

valuable," she said. "Hardwoods, walnut, maple... you can't find this wood firsthand anymore. Detroit's housing stock is ripe for this stuff. These materials are finding new life in flooring and furniture."

After recovery, the materials go to a warehouse where workers remove nails, sand wood and otherwise prepare the materials for resale through Reclaim Detroit, which helps cover some of the deconstruction labor costs.

"There is a return on investment, but it hasn't hit the mark we want it to, yet," Leen said. "Our intention is not to create a market, but there is a business, a way to figure out how to make it work."

Gina Cavaliere, deputy director for the Wayne County Economic Development Growth Engine, said the county was po-

sitioned perfectly to coordinate this program.

"It makes sense for a government to take the lead and test it, because it might not be a sustainable economic model for the private sector. As a community model it makes perfect sense."

Grace said the extra resources the county puts in will continue to pay off.

"Deconstruction costs a little more than demolition but you're funneling the money into the local economy, saving landfills and reclaiming usable and valuable materials," she said. "The county isn't being shortsighted and saying they need to get rid of [blighted properties] immediately. It's not the solution to Detroit and Wayne County's blight problems, but it's part of the solution."

Profiles in Service



» Brad Carlyon

Member, Justice and Public Safety Steering Committee
County Attorney, Navajo County, Ariz.

Number of years active in NACo: Four

Years in public service: 16, with five as an elected official

Occupation: county attorney (prosecution and civil responsibilities)

Education: J.D., University of Arizona; B.S. in business administration, Northern Arizona University

The hardest thing I've ever done: having to tell the family of a child molestation victim that there was insufficient evidence to convict

Three people (living or dead) I'd invite to dinner: Mark Twain, Martin Luther King and Thomas Jefferson.

A dream I have is to: protect children from predators.

You'd be surprised to learn that I: danced the waltz in a dance competition.

The most adventurous thing I've ever done is: skydive.

My favorite way to relax is: sailing.

I'm most proud of: creation of a Children's Advocacy Center to assist children who were victims of physical or sexual abuse.

Every morning I read: Twitter, my new source for news.

My favorite meal is: chile rellenos with rice and beans, followed by an Italian cream cake.

My pet peeve is: people who complain but won't do anything.

My motto is: I wished someone would do something; then I realized I was someone.

The last book I read was: *Effective Fundraising for Nonprofits: Real-World Strategies That Work*, by Ilona Bray, J.D.

My favorite movie is: *Hoosiers*.

My favorite music is: eclectic, from classical to jazz to metal.

My favorite president is: George Washington, he set a high standard.

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