

Deconstruction, Not Neighborhood Destruction

By Dan O'Brien

There is the strategy that's guided the city's demolition practice for decades: raze a building or house, send the debris to a landfill, and in some cases erase the architectural importance of the structure forever. Then there's a new tactic under consideration that recycles materials from some of these houses so their bricks, stone and lumber can remain in use.

"It's a pilot program," said the Youngstown's community development director, Bill D'Avignon, June 23 as he watched a large trencher tear apart a section of an abandoned house at 945 Brentwood Ave. on the city's South Side. "We have another demo planned for a house on the North Side," he said.

The demolition is the first project in the city's Deconstruction Pilot Study, which is intended to create a self-sustaining mechanism for blight removal.

What sets this demolition apart from others is that contractors salvage as much brick, steel, lumber and stone as possible. These materials would then be cleaned and sold to either recyclers or to those in need of recycled construction materials.

D'Avignon said although many of these houses are in poor condition, a sizeable amount of building components can still be reused. Materials such as cut stone and brick are expensive, and this program would help recycle them.

The house on Brentwood is roughly 1,400 square feet. Costs associated with deconstruction often depend on the size of the structure and the work required to reclaim the materials, D'Avignon said. This project will end up costing about \$2,000 more than a typical demolition, which runs about \$2,400.

"In some cases, a normal demolition would take a day," he said. "This will probably take all week."

D'Avignon said he hopes 60% of the materials pulled out of the Brentwood house can be recycled. "We're asking them to document what they retrieve so we can assess the effectiveness of the program."

The contractor hired for the Brentwood Avenue house is US Green Building Materials of Youngstown. This is its first deconstruction project. Another company has been selected for the demolition of the house on the North Side.

Funding for the first phase of the pilot program was provided through a portion of the \$2.7 million grant the city received from the federal government's



Deconstruction of this house at 945 Brentwood Ave. will cost \$4,400, but will keep brick, stone and lumber out of the landfill.

neighborhood stabilization program. Another 10 houses are to be razed in this fashion and funded through a grant issued by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

D'Avignon said deconstruction is a major component of the Mahoning Valley's quest for another \$30 million in neighborhood stabilization funds. Last week, representatives of the city and eight other communities along the Mahoning River delivered a preliminary budget that detailed the area's needs. Demolition is a top priority of all nine communities.

The community development director said there are 4,500 vacant structures in the city, of which 1,170 structures are on a demolition list. To pursue deconstruction on all of them is impractical. "It doesn't make sense to do this all the time" he said, because of the costs involved.

Hunter Morrison, Youngstown State University's director of campus planning and community partnerships, believes the city should look into more "green" deconstruction. "These houses are built extremely well. There's been a lot of good stuff we've knocked down and that's the stuff we've lost."

Recycling building materials isn't practiced much in the Youngstown area because tipping fees at land-

fills are low compared to other parts of the country, observed David Bennink of Re-Use Consultants, Bellingham, Wash., the company retained to advise contractors on deconstruction procedures.

"This area has one of the lowest dumping fees in the country," Bennink said. "It essentially subsidizes demolition and landfill. So, if we can make it work here, we can make it work anywhere."

Bennink said he travels around the country as a consultant on projects such as these and trains groups in methods of tackling deconstruction in a safe fashion. The Brentwood Avenue house should be removed in three days, while it will take the rest of the week for cleanup and foundation removal.

"It's important to pick the best buildings" for deconstruction projects and assess the value of the materials inside, he said.

"I love it," exclaimed James London as he watched workers pick apart the house. London is a resident of the neighborhood and president of the Idora Neighborhood Association.

Neighborhood resident Rick Ostheimer said that he's thrilled the city is taking action against blight, and is even more encouraged about a plan to recycle materials from these abandoned dwellings.



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