

Tour Underscores Need for Fix-Up Dollars

Neighbors appeal to lieutenant governor for help.

By Maraline Kubik

Some residents are new to Youngstown; others have lived in the city their entire lives. Together, neighbors from all sides of town are joining forces to identify blighted properties and take their pleas for help to state office-holders.

Several members of the Mahoning Valley Organizing Collaborative, a grassroots organization made up of neighborhood associations, block watch groups, churches and community organizations, toured Youngstown neighborhoods by bus in advance of a meeting with Lt. Gov. Lee Fisher Feb. 17.

"That house is empty. It was foreclosed. Five years ago you never would have seen that in this neighborhood," one rider remarked as the bus made its way through an area on the city's north side where modest, well-maintained homes sit on manicured lots.

A few blocks away, another member of the group pointed out a handful of vacant houses in her neighborhood, many of them with boarded windows. Singling out a large brick house that is newly occupied, she said, "That house was empty for years. What made it worse, the owner brought his junk and left it here. There was a blue toilet in the front yard."

Across the street, a new elementary school has made a tremendous improvement to the neighborhood, she noted. Around the corner, a freshly graded field where The Rayen School once stood remains vacant. "We were hoping we'd get another school," the resident remarked. "But it doesn't look like we're going to get one."

Moments later and a few miles away, at the end of a street that runs off Wilson Avenue, the bus was flanked on both sides by the remains of houses abandoned long ago. Roofs that once covered the front porches rest precariously on broken supports. Shingles, old tires and rotted branches litter the yards. A shredded curtain flaps against the frame of a glassless window.

"You can see there's quite a difference here," a neighborhood block watch member noted.

Directly in front of the bus, across Wilson Avenue and along the river, idled industrial plants stretch to both sides. More than 1,500 people used to work there, someone commented, making a connection between the loss of viable employment and the deterioration of the adjacent neighborhood.

Another neighborhood, Arlington Heights, stands in sharp contrast to the abandoned street with the skeletal remains of crumbling houses. New houses on neatly maintained lots line both sides of the street – and those of neighboring streets – demonstrating the positive impact community organizations can have when they work together to eliminate blight. Arlington Heights is a redevelopment project of the Youngstown Metropolitan Housing Authority funded, in part, by a grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Built by Choice, Jubilee and Habitat for Humanity, the



Jim London, president of Idora Neighborhood Association, points to blighted and abandoned properties in his neighborhood.

houses replaced what had been a blighted eyesore – houses, or what remained of them, in shambles scattered haphazardly on trash-strewn lots.

The other neighborhoods, however, paint a clearer picture of what many city residents live with every day: vacant, abandoned or unkempt properties mixed in among those that are occupied and

well-maintained. Some of these were once among the city's most prominent neighborhoods.

One such neighborhood on the city's south side was once referred to as the "millionaire's playground," related Jim London, president of the Idora Neighborhood Association and a community block

See BLIGHT, page 36

Collaborative Aims to Abolish Blight

Blight: Bus Tour Underscores Need for Fix-Up Dollars

From Page 35

watch captain. The winding roads, expansive lawns and impressive historic houses hint of the opulence that once prevailed, but the peeling paint, broken railings and lifeless streets are today's reality.

"This whole block has been lost," London said, swooping an outstretched arm motioning from one side of the street to the other, from a long-abandoned vacant two-story with holes in the roof to a rambling ranch with boarded windows.

"We need the government to come and please help us," London pleaded. That help, he hopes, will come in the form of neighborhood stabilization funds from the government to acquire, rehabilitate or demolish blighted properties.

Later, during the meeting with the lieutenant governor, London pleaded his case, telling Fisher that the collaboration began with a handful of frustrated neighbors and grew to more than 240 members in just one year – all determined to change their neighborhoods for the better.

Targeting convenience stores, the group persuaded owners of some establishments to make repairs to their facades. Those who would not cooperate suffered the collaborative's wrath when they persuaded their neighbors to vote to rescind laws allowing the sale of alcoholic beverages. "We tried to work with the store owner but he wouldn't cooperate," London said. "So we dried up one precinct."

The collaborative also completed a vacant prop-

erty survey in the city, identifying vacant, blighted and at-risk properties, London told the lieutenant governor. The survey, conducted by volunteers who reside in each neighborhood, found that vacant houses sit on 43.7% of the lots in the city and that the vacancy rate for all structures is 12.3%. The study also determined that 36.4% of parcels in the city are vacant, more than double the national average of 15.4%. This amounts to 61.8 vacant parcels per 1,000 residents, London reported, making the point that Youngstown neighborhoods are much worse off than most. The national average, he said, is 2.63 vacant parcels per 1,000 residents.

A similar survey of neighborhoods in Warren is under way.