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Housing Bureau steps up outreach to north and northeast Portland



Bernice Hornbuckle received a low-interest loan to make major repairs to her home in the Interstate Corridor Urban Renewal Area. The Portland Housing Bureau is hoping for more people will take advantage of these programs to keep wealth in the community.

By Jake Thomas jthomas@portlandobserver.com

The Portland Housing Bureau is reaching out to residents of north and northeast Portland who might be struggling with a mortgage or need help to accomplish major repairs on their homes. The aim of their new efforts is to keep seniors and minorities in the gentrifying region from being displaced and maintain wealth in the community.

The issue has long been on the lips of concerned Portlanders in the north and northeast parts of the city, but came up front and center before the Portland Development Commission's North/Northeast Economic Development Initiative last January, a

community group that is evaluating the expansion of urban renewal in the area and reconfiguring funding priorities.

Present at the meeting was Margaret Van Vliet, the director of the bureau, who wrote in a follow up letter to PDC Commissioner Charles Wilhoite "...I heard loud and clear the call for services to prevent the involuntary of displacement of long-standing, low-income senior homeowners in North/Northeast Portland and among minority communities in particular."

The bureau has identified \$120,000 in flexible funding it plans to use for a pilot project, operated by a community-based organization that will connect homeowners with existing programs run by the Housing Bureau, the Portland Development Commission, and various non-profits that help fix up their houses or avoid foreclosure.

Housing Bureau spokesperson Maileen Hamto said the city hopes to provide direct outreach, technical assistance, and follow-up services to 80 low-income, senior homeowners in north and northeast with the pilot project.

The bureau is accepting proposals from community organizations to administer the program, according to Hamto, and hopes to have it up and running by July. The details of the program will depend on what sort of proposals the Housing Bureau ends up getting, she added.

"We're pretty open to how that will play out," said Hamto, who added that several organizations have expressed interest, including Sabin Community Development Corporation, the African-American Chamber of Commerce, and the Portland Housing Center.

The Portland Housing Bureau runs a grant program that gives \$5,000 to low-income and disabled homeowners to help with emergency and minor home repair services, weatherization, and accessibility improvements. There are also a number of free counseling services for people facing foreclosure of their homes.

Bernice Hornbuckle welcomed the low-interest loan she took to fix up her home as part of a program offered to people by the PDC living within the Interstate Corridor Urban Renewal Area.

Her roof had been stripped bare from too many stormy nights, and her chimney was steadily shedding bricks.

"Every time the wind blew, you needed to get ready to go and clean up roof paper from the yard," she said.

But that changed when she got the \$8,000 loan from the PDC to fix up her northeast house, which now belies its former state of disrepair.

The Housing Bureau doesn't have any hard numbers on displacement for north and northeast Portland, said Hamto, but the community organization that runs the program will be charged with getting that data. In the meantime, it wants to create more success stories like Hornbuckle's.

In March, the Housing Bureau held a meeting with a number of community organizations to discuss the program. A follow up letter from Van Vilet contains a summary of comments made by representatives from various community organizations present at the meeting. Some of them contend that many housing programs are already overburdened, and that the \$120,000 contract won't solve the problem. Even Hamto can't explain how home repair loans will keep people from being displaced.

Hornbuckle, sitting in the tidy dining room of her house, said she knew about the program that fixed her house because her mother, who had owned it before her, had used a similar one decades ago to repair the basement.

When asked how the Housing Bureau might do better outreach, she said that advertisements, and fliers could help. But a truly effective method is word of mouth, she said.

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