

County outlines role in housing initiative

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By MATT HUTCHINSON (mhutchinson@sungazette.com) , Williamsport Sun-Gazette

A three-pronged city housing and neighborhood improvement project that will provide more than 200 new and revitalized residential units was detailed by Lycoming County commissioners and county planning and community development staff Thursday.

Plans call for the former Brodart warehouse on Memorial Avenue to be razed for a 74-unit complex using a combination of apartments, townhouses and single-family homes. Low- to moderate income and market-rate residences will be available at the site.

About 150 existing homes in the Memorial Avenue neighborhood will be included in an improvement project that will assist with interior and exterior health and safety improvements, facade restorations and streetscape enhancements, according to Kim Wheeler, county community development planner.

Grove Street Commons will be designed for senior citizens ages 62 and up. The 32-unit apartment style complex will be constructed between Grove and Almond streets.

Much of the funding - up to 85 percent, according to county officials - comes from private investors.

The \$1.1 million for the project commissioners and State Sen. E. Eugene Yaw, R-Loyalsock Township, announced this week originates from the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency and Marcellus Shale Act 13 impact fees paid by natural gas drillers.

In all, the cost for the Memorial Homes project, Brodart neighborhood improvement program and Grove Street Commons is \$26 million.

Lycoming County has committed \$470,000 of its Act 13 funds for the next three years, while the city has committed \$100,000 of its Act 13 money. City funding also is coming from \$150,000 in federal Community Development Block Grant money and \$60,000 of federal affordable housing funding.

The housing initiative stems from years of planning and results of housing studies that show a dire need of local housing due to the growth of the Marcellus Shale natural gas drilling activity, said Bill Kelly, deputy director of the county's planning and community development department.

"It is not possible to meet all the housing needs and mitigate every housing impact created by the shale gas development," Commissioner Jeff Wheeland said in a statement issued Thursday. "Therefore, Lycoming County's plan is to target its investment decisions and resources to meet the most pressing needs while investing in projects that will have the largest positive impact on its communities."

Money from Act 13 fees are expected to continue as long as natural gas wells remain active in the county.

"It is the intention of the board of commissioners to continue to seek and pursue projects around the county for future year applications," added Wheeland. "Fees earned in three of the municipalities in Lycoming County that by law were sent to Harrisburg are now being provided back to the county where they were earned to help us fund our housing needs."

The Brodart warehouse block, which encompasses about 3.4 acres in the city's west end, will be rezoned from industrial to residential, Wheeler said. Public hearings will take place before the change, she said.

Up to \$25,000 per eligible household may be used for improvements in that neighborhood, Wheeler added. Those improvements would be contracted under STEP Inc., which may begin needs assessments by spring of 2013, she said.

Kelly said the Memorial Homes project is a perfect example of adaptive reuse of a brownfields site.

"This would not be possible without the community civic-mindedness of the Brodart Co. to make the building available," he said.

Any industrial waste will be remediated to meet or exceed state and federal regulations, Kelly said.

Borrowing a slightly different line from the movie, "Field of Dreams," Kelly said, "If we remediate it, they will build."

He said that once the county's role in environmental remediation is finished, the city will take the lead role in the housing projects