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- By Andrew Cass

# May start eyed for project

‘Better Flip’ initiative aims to make homes more attractive to young homebuyers

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Mark Rantala calls it one of the most important undertakings in his nearly five years as executive director of the Lake County Ohio Port and Economic Development Authority.



ANDREW CASS - THE NEWS-HERALD The Lake County Ohio Port and Economic Development Authority is renovating a home at 557 E. 305th St. in Willowick in an effort to show young homebuyers what is possible with Lake County’s west-end bungalows.

There are 15,000 bungalows in Lake County's west-end communities. Most of those postwar homes were built between 1948 and 1955. The housing stock is good, but the homes themselves are outdated. They don't have things like open-concept kitchens, walk-in closets and master suites that young, modern homebuyers are looking for.

With the "Better Flip" initiative, he's hoping to make those homes more attractive to young homebuyers.

That plan took a big step forward in late March when the port authority board approved \$150,000 to be used for renovation work at a Willowick home at 557 E. 305th St., which was donated to the agency from the Lake County Land Bank.

A website, a series of how-to-videos and other pieces of information will be compiled to help guide homeowners and prospective homeowners through the process of updating the houses.

"The list we're going to have for the people who go through it is going to start with building permits, architectural design, every step of the way with each of the individual trades because people who have never done this scale remodeling don't know where to start," Rantala previously told The News-Herald. "We're going to try to take them through the whole process."

Rantala said they're going to make as many upgrades and renovations to the home as they can to show people everything possible they can do. He said they don't expect people to do every single one, but pick and choose which projects to undertake. They're also trying to use as many local subcontractors as possible to show people what is available.

Rantala said they're not getting into the home flipping business. This is a one-and-done project. The goal is to have the ideas applied by others, whether its young homebuyers, people looking to sell their homes or homeowners just looking to update their homes.

"I think we have an opportunity to show 1950s bungalows in a different light," he said.

It's an opportunity, he thinks, to bring young families back into the aging county, where at the current rate 34 percent of its residents will be over the age of 60 by 2030 and will outnumber residents 20 years and younger.

There are more retirees than people entering the workforce, Rantala said. Bringing in younger families could help bolster the workforce in the county, where Rantala said there will be shortages in a decade.

There are about 4,000 bungalows in Willowick, Rantala said. The city's mayor, Richard Regovich, has been a supporter of the "Better Flip" idea since seeing renderings designed

by Auburn Career Center's architectural program in 2016.

Regovich said the home that the port authority is getting from the Land Bank is a great example of the housing stock in Willowick.

Rantala said they're still finalizing plans with the architect, but are hoping to begin work in May. When the project is completed, the port authority is anticipating having about three months of open houses before auctioning off the home.

Regovich is also working on having a Community Reinvestment Area created in the city, which would allow homeowners to apply for tax abatements for renovation work they do on the homes. He's hoping to have that program rolled out by the summer so that information could be distributed during the open house.

The mayor is also interested in trying to bring the Heritage Home Program to Willowick. Peter Zahirsky, the port authority's director of coastal development, brought the program to the attention of the county's mayors and managers at a recent meeting.

The program, launched by the Cleveland Restoration Society in 1992, is not yet available in Lake County, but Zahirsky is working to change that.

Zahirsky said the program provides technical assistance and low-interest financing for renovations. To be eligible, homes need to be 50 years old and located in a participating city.

He said the technical assistance is independent and impartial. They're not going to make you hire a certain contractor or take on a certain service they provide.

"They come out, they walk through the house with you, they walk around the house with you, help you prioritize your projects," he said. "Give you names of contractors who are experienced and they know do good work, but don't push them on you."

As residents get estimates, program officials review them and go over numbers and what it means. They also do energy efficiency consultations and color consultations. Zahirsky said they'll even research the original color of home when it was first built. These services are provided at no cost to residents in the participating communities.

The loans are fixed rate, generally for five to 10 years. The bank sets the lending, so the person still has to qualify for the bank's loan, Zahirsky said. The restoration society does charge some minimal fees that are worked into the loan. The borrower doesn't pay anything out of pocket unless they want to, he added.

"Money is held in escrow by the restoration society, so as you're getting the work done, they'll send out a construction specialist, they'll look at the work and make sure it's been done according to the scope of work and all the specifications required," Zahirsky said. The contractor doesn't get paid until they've shown they've done the work they're supposed to do. That's part of the service they provide. So you're not just dealing with the contractor on your own."

Zahirsky said Erie Bank has expressed interest in participating in the program in Lake County and the port authority is working out the logistics with them.

In order for cities to participate, they're required to pay an annual fee based on the number of homes that qualify for the program, which can be determined by the county Auditor's Office. The west-end communities are typically expected to have between 4,000 and 5,000 homes that will qualify. The annual fee per home will likely be between \$2 and \$2.50, Zahirsky said.

According to the Heritage Home Program's website, they've provided 9,000 homeowners with technical advice on over \$200 million in projects. They've facilitated 1,200 low-interest loans totaling more than \$46 million in neighborhood reinvestment.