

# Demolition grant requests include hundreds of houses

BY MICHELLE JARBOE

Northeast Ohio land banks are seeking state demolition grants to eradicate everything from abandoned houses to the remnants of the Akron Rubber Bowl.

Those requests are part of almost \$172.7 million worth of applications being vetted by the Ohio Department of Development, through a new initiative aimed at curbing vacancy and blight. The initial application window for the state's demolition and site revitalization program closed Feb. 28. Public records show the program, with a nearly \$150 million budget, already is oversubscribed.

Applicants from eight Northeast Ohio counties asked for \$28.6 million in grants, with the Cuyahoga Land Bank leading the way, according to state documents provided to Crain's in response to a public records request. Those applications span a block of downtown Barberton, where old building foundations are filled with gravel; development sites in Mentor and Elyria; and seven apartment buildings on one derelict East Cleveland street.

Last year, in the biennial budget, the General Assembly allocated \$500 million to cleaning up contaminated real estate and tearing down buildings.

Seventy percent of that cash was earmarked for studying and remediating brownfields, properties where redevelopment efforts are complicated by lingering hazards or pollutants. The rest of the money was reserved for razing abandoned and vacant buildings with no known environmental woes.

Early applicants for brownfield grants sought just over \$262 million — falling short of that program's \$350 million cap and leaving room for follow-up funding rounds. The state has not announced any awards yet.

The smaller demolition program, by contrast, quickly surpassed its ceiling.

"We knew that this was going to be the fastest pot of money to be gone," said Patrick Bravo, executive director of the Summit County Land Bank.

It's too early to say which pull-down projects will receive funding. State development officials set aside \$500,000 for each county until June 30 and laid out a first-come, first-served formula for the remaining \$106 million in grants.

The state received applications from 80 of Ohio's 88 counties, records show. A quarter of those applicants requested less than \$500,000, though.

The program required applications for each county to flow through a single applicant — a quasi-governmental land bank, in most cases. In



A dilapidated house sits empty on Cleveland's East Side. | MICHELLE JARBOE/CRAIN'S CLEVELAND BUSINESS

counties without land banks, boards of commissioners could select another lead entity.

The Cuyahoga Land Bank, formally called the Cuyahoga County Land Reutilization Corp., requested almost \$9.5 million in grants. Its applications cover more than 430 parcels, many of them on Cleveland's East Side.

Most of the structures are single-family or two-family homes or modest apartment buildings, said Kim Kimlin, the land bank's director of community stabilization. Dozens of the parcels are in state forfeiture, after going through tax foreclosure and failing to attract bidders at sheriff's auctions.

Roughly 300 of the addresses are nuisance-abatement demolitions in Cleveland, where the land bank would tear down privately-owned buildings red-flagged by the city.

In 14 cases, the land bank applied on behalf of other entities, including suburban governments, the Cleveland Metroparks and CCH Development Corp., a nonprofit affiliate of the MetroHealth System. The land bank would convey grants to those sub-recipients, who would handle the demolitions.

The Summit County Land Bank is seeking \$6.7 million in grants tied to 44 projects, including some notable commercial properties. That money would contribute to \$9 million worth of demolition and site work, Bravo said, noting that the state's program requires matching funds for all requests above the first \$500,000 per county.

The Summit County applications include the former Babcock & Wilcox Enterprises Inc. headquarters in Barberton, a Van Buren Avenue complex owned by Solon-based developer Industrial Commercial Properties LLC.

Akron hopes to dispense with the rest of the Rubber Bowl, a storied football stadium that was partially demolished in 2018. The nearby John

W. Heisman Lodge, on George Washington Boulevard, also appears on the list of demolition requests.

And the Summit County Land Bank, acting on behalf of sub-recipients in most cases, is pursuing funds to raze four schools, an old fire station in Tallmadge and a shuttered Motel 6 in Akron. Bravo said the land bank, which moved swiftly late last year to open an online portal for grant requests, still is hearing from public- and private-sector property owners who missed the deadline to apply.

"It was immensely popular," he said of the program.

The Lorain County Land Reutilization Corp. asked for \$4.4 million in grants, according to state records. The teardown targets range from an obsolete parking garage in Lorain to an old farmhouse, silo and barn in Grafton, said James Miller, the land bank's assistant director.

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— Kim Kimlin, the Cuyahoga Land Bank's director of community stabilization

In every case, the land bank would serve as an intermediary, conveying grant money to local governments and other recipients, Miller said.

In Geauga County, which has no land bank, the board of county commissioners applied for more than \$4.1 million in grants. The largest ask, by far, is for demolition at the old Geauga Lake amusement park in Bainbridge. Industrial Commercial Properties is remaking the sprawling property as a master-planned, mixed-use project called the Geauga Lake District.

"If they are granted, that's huge for them," said Gina Hofstetter, program manager in the Geauga County's department of community and economic development.

The Lake County Land Reutilization Corp. turned in \$1.2 million worth of grant requests, including applications to clear the way for Uptown Mentor, an office-and-retail development. That project recently won tax credits through the state's new Transformational Mixed-Use Development Program.

The state demolition grants will allow land banks to stretch their own dollars further and will help communities eliminate eyesores that depress the value of nearby real estate, said John Rogers, the Lake County land bank's executive director.

State records show that the Stark County Land Reutilization Corp. submitted just over \$1 million worth of grant requests, for structures including a onetime

Kmart in North Canton and a former diner in Alliance. The Medina County Port Authority asked for \$973,553 in funding. And the Portage County Land Reutilization Corp. applied for \$626,263 in grants.

Kimlin, at the Cuyahoga Land Bank, said the state money will make a meaningful dent in the backlog of vacant and abandoned properties.

But a one-time program won't obliterate decay.

"What we really need is more of an ongoing funding source from the state, a year-by-year allocation, because there's always going to be some level of blight," she said. "And we still have a tremendous level of legacy blight across the state."

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