

Grant a Big Boost for All of Lynchburg

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A state grant to rehabilitate housing in two central city neighborhoods has the potential to fulfill two significant needs. First, the money will create more affordable and better housing for families who need it. And, second, the improved housing will breathe new life into those aging neighborhoods.

The \$1 million grant will be a blessing both for the neighborhoods — Middle Rivermont around Early Street and Diamond Hill near Grace Street — and for the city itself. Those are two areas deemed to be suffering from a high rate of foreclosures and abandoned properties.

Gov. Timothy M. Kaine's office announced the award last week to four nonprofit organizations that will share in the rehabilitation. "This is a considerable amount of money that we can invest in a concentrated way in two vulnerable neighborhoods," said Laura Dupuy, executive director of the Lynchburg Neighborhood Development Foundation, which served as the lead organization on the funding application.

The money was awarded through the Virginia Neighborhood Stabilization Program, a new initiative focused on combating the state's rising foreclosure rate. While the rate in the city is not as high as the state rate, it is dealing with the same risk factors affecting inner cities elsewhere across Virginia.

The state Department of Housing and Community Development reports that the older cities, including Lynchburg, have high-risk communities with a "significant number of subprime loans, growing unemployment and high vacancy rates."

Without state assistance, the agency adds, "these at-risk communities will likely see an expanding list of affected properties that become a source of blight and drain on the surrounding community."

That is precisely what the city is trying to avoid as the nonprofit groups work to use the state money to improve housing and those neighborhoods. Dupuy has estimated that as many as 11 houses could be rehabilitated with the money. The partner agencies are working with a real estate agent to identify eligible properties.

Houses acquired under the program will be renovated — or in some cases razed and rebuilt — for future sale or rental to low- to middle-income families. Home buyers will be aided by the nonprofit groups through a counseling program and financing assistance.

Gary Christie, executive director of Region 2000's local government council, put his finger on the importance of the state grants when he said, "There are some tough houses in these neighborhoods that are in mighty rough shape. These groups will be able to fix them up, get them back on their feet and help revitalize these neighborhoods." The local government council will administer the state grant money.

Good housing is such an important part of any family trying to stay together and to make ends meet. It is also vital to the fabric of the city.

That's why this grant has to be viewed as an important one to the city and to the families whose housing needs will be improved drastically.