

www.thrivingcommunitiesinstitute.org Spring 2012

A message from Jim Rokakis



Welcome to the first edition of Urban Landline, the newsletter of Western Reserve Land Conservancy's Thriving Communities Institute.

Thriving Communities is working throughout Ohio to create county land banks, a tool in revitalizing our urban areas and repurposing vacant and abandoned properties. As I speak with public officials in all corners of the state, I continually hear about the need to stop the decline of not only our major cities, but mid-size cities as well. One city mayor agreed that land banks are a great idea, but added that a land bank without money for demolition is like "a new car without gas."

In response to these concerns, we have successfully worked with Ohio Attorney General Mike DeWine to earmark $75 million of the recent mortgage bank settlement monies for demolition grants - providing matching funds to allow communities to rid themselves of blighted properties and replace them with land that is Clean and Green. We are also working with U.S. Reps. Steve LaTourette and Marcia Fudge on legislation providing for issuance of qualified urban demolition bonds and providing federal tax credits to purchasers of these bonds in lieu of interest payments.

Successful passage of this bill will provide additional funding for demolition of nuisance properties, thereby improving our cities one property at a time.

I thank the Land Conservancy's Board of Trustees for its continuing support of Thriving Communities Institute as we work to extend the Land Conservancy's mission into our urban areas.

Quicklinks

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As many as 100,000 vacant homes in Ohio are awaiting demolition.

Bill would fund demolition work

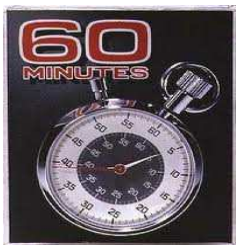
A bill introduced by U.S. Reps. Steve LaTourette and Marcia Fudge would provide $4 billion for states and land banks to issue demolition bonds to raze vacant, foreclosed and abandoned homes across the country. The bill, which was crafted with the assistance of Thriving Communities Institute's Jim Rokakis, is aimed at preventing "a tsunami of blight." LaTourette said many vacant homes "are stripped bare, are magnets for crime and are causing surrounding property values to plummet." Click here to read reporter Jennifer DePaul's story on the bill in The Bond Buyer.



Jim Rokakis and Mike DeWine at a Cleveland press conference.

New hope for neighborhoods

In an editorial, The Plain Dealer supported the settlement that sets aside $75 million for the demolition of vacant and abandoned homes in Ohio. Ohio Attorney General Mike DeWine announced that the allocated money is part of a joint federal-state settlement with five of the nation's largest mortgage servicers over foreclosure abuses, fraud and unacceptable mortgage practices. Thriving Communities Institute worked closely with the attorney general's office on this portion of the settlement, which DeWine said would "provide communities with much-needed funding to remove the blight and give our neighborhoods a chance to prosper."



Missed '60 Minutes'? Here it is

In December, Jim Rokakis, a nationally recognized expert on the foreclosure and vacancy crisis, appeared on a "60 Minutes" segment titled "There Goes the Neighborhood." Scott Pelley interviewed Jim about the problems posed by scores of vacant and abandoned houses -- and Cuyahoga County's efforts to make neighborhoods safer by tearing down homes. This segment has helped fuel a national discussion about the best ways to revitalize communities that have been devastated by foreclosures. If you missed the CBS piece, you can watch it here.

Hamilton County Land Bank launched

The first new land bank started with the assistance of the Land Conservancy's Thriving Communities Institute is in the process of establishing policies that will soon allow it to take in properties. The newly created Hamilton County Land Bank will be operated by the Port of Greater Cincinnati Development Authority, headed by President/CEO Laura Brunner. The Port Authority has approved a $2,460,000 budget for 2012.

Work to create the land bank began in August 2011, when the Hamilton County Board of County Commissioners entered into a consultant agreement with Thriving Communities. After a series of county resolutions, the organizational meeting of the Hamilton County Land Reutilization Corporation was held on Jan. 9.

The Land Bank Board is made up of the County Commissioners Greg Hartmann, Chris Monzel and Todd Portune, County Treasurer Robert Goering, Cincinnati Vice Mayor Roxanne Qualls and Springfield Township Trustee Joe Honerlaw. Silverton City Council member Mark Quarry, Sycamore Township Trustee Tom Weidman and Carolyn Rolfes, president of Potterhill

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Upcoming Events

Adam's Run Cleanup
9 a.m.-noon
Saturday, April 28
Akron

Join volunteers from throughout northern Ohio as we clean up Adam's Run and Haley's Run, two sections of what may one day be a greenway connecting southeast Akron to the Towpath Trail.

Cleveland International Film Festival
"Women With Cows"
7:40 p.m. Tuesday, March 27
1:50 p.m. Wednesday, March 28
11:40 a.m. Thursday, March 29
Tower City Center
Cleveland

Western Reserve Land Conservancy will give brief introductory remarks before this film about the difficult lives of women on a Swedish dairy farm. For more information, visit wwwclevelandfilm.org.

Conservation Rocks!
Friday, June 8
Beachland Ballroom and Tavern
Cleveland

The third annual concert features performances from talented local musicians who work in the field of conservation. It's great fun!

For more event details, visit www.wrlandconservancy.org



Homes, round out the nine-member board.

Commissioner Hartmann told Cincinnati's Fox 19 News that "it (the Land Bank) allows the county to focus on where those challenging properties are and how we can make them income generating properties, both for business and residences."

"The level of cooperation among Hamilton County officials was the key to bringing the land bank to fruition," said Robin Darden Thomas, Thriving Communities' Land Bank Program Director. Darden Thomas worked directly with Hamilton County representatives to prepare the necessary documents for approval by County Commissioners and the Land Bank Board and is currently consulting with the Port Authority staff in establishing land bank policies and procedures.



Washington Post column on demolition

In an opinion piece in The Washington Post titled "When the best way to save a neighborhood is to tear it down," Jim Rokakis makes the case for demolishing vacant and abandoned homes in places devastated by the foreclosure crisis. "The answer isn't to scrape together money to try to fix these homes. The solution is to tear them down. Only a thoughtful and large-scale demolition program can save what's left. Only the elimination of worthless housing can allow cities to reposition their neighborhoods for rebirth."



Dan Kildee.

Fed hosts first land bank event

A national expert on community development and neighborhood stabilization told attendees as the First Convening of Ohio Land Banks that Ohio has made great strides on the land-banking front. Dan Kildee, who founded the county land bank model in Michigan, said Ohio land-banking legislation, initiated by Thriving Communities' director Jim Rokakis, has become a model for other states, such as New York and Georgia. Kildee said that Ohio has created land banks with "super powers." He delivered the keynote address at the Cleveland conference, which was co-hosted by Thriving Communities Institute and the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland. The event helped encourage the launch of additional county land banks in Ohio.

Western Reserve Land Conservancy
OUR LAND. OUR LEGACY.

How Thriving Communities was formed

In March 2011, Western Reserve Land Conservancy launched a region-wide effort to help revitalize our urban centers. We named the effort Thriving Communities Institute because of all the connotations the word thriving holds for urban centers: flourishing, prospering, blossoming and successful. Our cities have thrived in the past; and we believe they will thrive again. They will move from vacancy to vitality.

Thriving Communities Institute, led by director Jim Rokakis, is already lending its hand to transform vacant and unproductive properties into new opportunities to attract economic growth, to bring green space to our cities, and to support safe, beautiful neighborhoods. In working with community leaders in our region, we have learned that urban revitalization is a process, one with many steps supported by great partnerships. Thriving Communities is helping secure our cities' vacant, unhealthy properties by establishing and supporting county land banksthroughout our region.

Meet the Thriving Communities staff



Jim Rokakis, director

Growing up in Cleveland's Archwood-Denison neighborhood,Jim Rokakis saw first hand how neighbors helping neighbors could strengthen an entire community. Today, Rokakis is one of the nation's leading experts on the foreclosure crisis and neighborhood revitalization. In his 33-year career in public service as a member of Cleveland City Council and then Cuyahoga County Treasurer, he was instrumental in the passage of several landmark pieces of legislation. Faced with Cuyahoga County's mortgage foreclosure crisis, he helped to write and pass House Bill 294, which streamlines the foreclosure process for abandoned properties. Additionally, Jim was the driving force behind a bill that allowed for the creation of the Cuyahoga County Land Reutilization Corporation, also known as the Cuyahoga County Land Bank. Jim recently appeared on "60 Minutes" and wrote a column for The Washington Post.

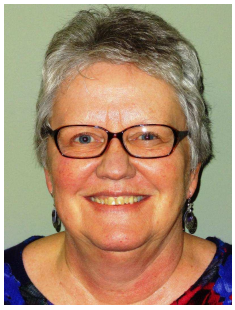
He has received the NeighborWorks America Local Government Service Award, the Leadership in Social Justice Award from Greater Cleveland Community Shares and was named the County Leader of the Year by American City and County Magazine.



Win resort getaways, outdoor packages and more!

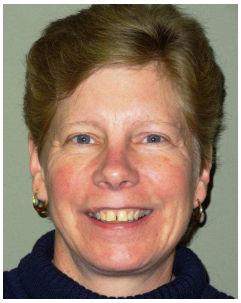
Enter Western Reserve Land Conservancy's Spring Fever Sweepstakes for a chance to win one of several great prizes, including overnight stays at The Inn on Kelleys Island and The Lodge at Geneva-on-the-Lake, canoe and kayak trips and dinner at the new Spice Restaurant+Bar, which features local foods. Just go to the Land Conservancy's Facebook page, like us and click on the 'Sweeps' icon to learn how you can enter. No purchase or donation is required to enter. Like us on Facebook

Jim earned his undergraduate degree at Oberlin College and his Juris Doctorate degree from Cleveland-Marshall School of Law. Married with three children, Jim resides in Rocky River.



Robin Darden Thomas, land bank program director

Robin Darden Thomas served as Interim County Treasurer and as Chief Deputy Treasurer of Cuyahoga County, where she was responsible for the collection of nearly $2 billion of taxes annually and the investment of Cuyahoga County's $500 million portfolio. She negotiated the first tax lien sale/purchase agreement in Cuyahoga County and was instrumental in establishing a funding mechanism for the county land bank. Prior to joining the Cuyahoga County Treasurer's office, her public service experience included the coordination of property assessments and real estate taxation for the Cuyahoga County Auditor's office. Robin received her bachelor's degree and master's degree in education from the University of Virginia, and an MBA from Cleveland State University. She lives in Parma.



Kate Hydock, executive assistant

Kate Hydock began her public service career in 1977 as a secretary for Cleveland City Council and in 1990 was promoted to supervisor of council's support staff. From 1997 through May 2011, Kate served as administrative assistant to then Cuyahoga County Treasurer Jim Rokakis and Interim Cuyahoga County Treasurer Robin Darden Thomas, providing administrative support and secretarial assistance in all facets of their daily responsibilities. She also served as supervisor of the Treasurer's Administrative office for 11 years, supervising three staff members. A graduate of St. Joseph Academy, Kate lives in Cleveland.

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