

Dream Neighborhood aims to weave refugee housing into West Side neighborhoods

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By **Michelle Jarboe McFee, The Plain Dealer**

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Kat Oberst Ledger and her husband, Art, recall when West 48th Street teemed with drug dealers and sounds of gunfire peppered the night. Now their street, near the intersection of Cleveland's Stockyards and Clark-Fulton neighborhoods, is quiet at sundown. Empty houses sit, windows boarded, awaiting demolition. A hummingbird sanctuary and gardens have sprung up on vacant lots.

During the last decade, the Ledgers say, the neighborhood has improved. It also has emptied out, thanks to foreclosures, abandonment and urban decay. But the Ledgers could be welcoming new neighbors – hailing from places as far-flung as Bhutan, Somalia and Ukraine – over the next few years, if a consortium of community leaders, nonprofit groups and public officials has its way.

These newcomers, refugees fleeing danger or persecution in their home countries, need places to live. Cleveland has plenty of empty homes, many of which could be rehabbed rather than bulldozed if potential landlords knew tenants were on their way. That supply-and-demand equation is the basic premise of the Dream Neighborhood, a plan to reinvigorate a slice of the city's West Side by appealing to refugees while improving living conditions for existing residents.

On Friday, the **Cleveland City Planning Commission** will get its first look at this land-use concept, during an introductory presentation at City Hall. At this point, there's nothing that requires a public vote. There's no mountain of government money on the table, though councilmen have pushed for more demolition spending to raze the worst eyesores in the neighborhood. But there appears to be city support, from Mayor Frank Jackson on down, for the idea of making Cleveland a more welcoming place, a haven for people forced to leave their home countries.

"It's just starting," said Tony Bango, who oversees housing redevelopment programs in the Stockyards, Clark-Fulton and Brooklyn Centre neighborhoods for a **nonprofit community group**. "We've got the first couple of homes that we're starting to look at that are ready to be used as a kind of trial run for the program. All the refugee-resettlement organizations are genuinely interested in what we're doing. I suspect that, by the end of 2016, we might have done 15 houses.

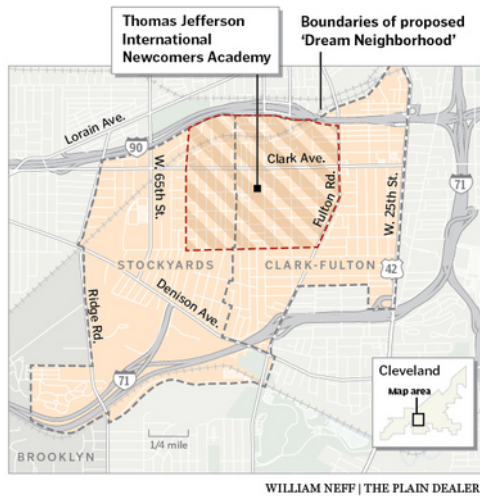
"To be frank with you," he added, "we're right at that point where concept is starting to turn into feet on the ground."

Vacant properties await renovations, renters

Late last year, Bango found more than 140 condemned or vacant properties in the Dream Neighborhood footprint – an area within roughly a half mile of Thomas Jefferson International Newcomers Academy, a public school focused on immigrant students who speak little to no English.

A dozen or so of the abandoned houses, the worst offenders, already have been

demolished. But many of the homes there aren't hopeless. Those houses could end up in the **Cuyahoga Land Bank**, after a foreclosure, or be donated to a community nonprofit by lenders who don't see an upside to hanging on. More than 100 such houses on the near-West Side already have been gutted, rehabilitated and sold to owner-occupants or investors during the last few years.



Marketing the next round of renovations to agencies that serve refugees could broaden the pipeline of potential renters and eventual buyers, Bango said. The theory, espoused by Councilmen Joe Cimperman and Brian Cummins, is that more families, more children walking to school and more entrepreneurs ought to lift the fortunes of the entire neighborhood.

That's not to say that refugees are a panacea for Cleveland's real estate problems.

"Cleveland's very high on levels of stagnation, on levels of lack of mobility," said Richey Piiparinen, a demographer who leads the **Center for Population Dynamics** at Cleveland State University. "That's going to burn you in the

knowledge economy. Any initiatives that can bring circulation into the system, particularly if they are refugees or foreign-born, is very helpful to places like Cleveland. And ... [the Dream Neighborhood] is a particular, place-based model that could have payback. It's a very real, tangible project that is connecting globally."

But, he cautioned, "we have to be careful with initiatives that just bring bodies here because we have empty houses. What we need to have are jobs available to them, services available to them. Population growth is an effect of job growth, regional job growth. Not the cause of it."

Small group could have big impact

The United States accepts approximately 70,000 refugees each year, through a coordinated effort between the Department of State and the United Nations. For some perspective, the country's annual refugee intake is smaller than a full-house crowd at FirstEnergy Stadium, which seats 73,000 people.

Between Oct. 1 of 2013 and Sept. 30 of last year, three local resettlement agencies placed 673 newcomers in Cuyahoga County, many of them in Lakewood, Cleveland Heights and Cleveland. During their current fiscal year, which ends in September, those agencies expect to find homes for 700 refugees. That might translate to demand for 250 to 300 residences.

Cimperman wants to capture some of those new households and concentrate them near Thomas Jefferson school, chipping away at a citywide vacancy challenge that spans thousands of properties. He envisions a repopulated neighborhood where longtime residents live next door to refugees who help maintain shared gardens, find jobs in the area and start businesses on Clark and Storer avenues, two depleted commercial corridors.

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nearby country, refugees register with the United Nations and seek help. They have three options: Finding a way to return home safely, settling in the country they fled to or migrating to a third country.

Using a complicated formula, the federal government, national agencies and local resettlement groups determine how many new refugees a city or county can support. The resettlement agencies then find and furnish places for the families to live and provide support services, from employment counseling to English lessons, for anywhere from six months to five years.

Without jobs, traditional resumes or Social Security numbers, refugees rely on government assistance and grant programs to cover their early rent and utility payments. But they quickly find work and self-sufficiency. Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Cleveland, which runs the **largest local resettlement program**, says many refugees land in manufacturing, industrial food, housekeeping and restaurant work.

"In most cases, the refugees are on their own in four months, 120 days after arrival," said Tom Mrosko, director of refugee resettlement for Catholic Charities.

Developers buy into the dream

Jean Ngaodoul, a 42-year-old refugee from the Central African Republic, arrived in Lakewood in 2012 and found a job in construction. In his previous life, he was a supervisor for a forestry company. Now he works for Daryl Anderson, a **rehabber** who buys deeply discounted houses on Cleveland's West Side and renovates them as rentals that go for anywhere from \$500 to \$750 a month.

"I learned English before when I was in Africa, but it was a long time ago," said Ngaodoul, who slips between his new language and his native French at work. "I never knew that one day I would move from my country to an English country. ... When I came here, I knew just how to say 'hi' and 'good morning.'"

Anderson employs three refugees and has rented out houses to 20 or more refugee families. He's formed relationships with Catholic Charities and the other two local resettlement agencies, the **International Services Center** and **US Together**, and discovered a pipeline of dedicated workers and reliable renters.

So far, he hasn't tackled any houses in the

"I'm telling you now," Cimperman says, conveying his passion for the project with words that can't be printed in a family newspaper, "the ... USS Refugee ship is coming to port. Get on."

Refugees have left their home countries and are afraid to return due to persecution based on race, religion, nationality or political opinions. After fleeing, often to a



Art Ledger and Kat Oberst Ledger stand at the edge of a butterfly and hummingbird sanctuary on their street on Cleveland's near-West Side. The couple lives in the middle of an area being designated as the Dream Neighborhood, with an eye on adding housing for refugees.

Dream Neighborhood, where troubled properties might sell for \$5,000 to \$7,000 but require an investment of more than \$50,000. But Anderson and other developers are interested, particularly if the city and nonprofit groups can secure other funding, such as foundation support or tax credits, to help cover a portion of the renovation costs and encourage reinvestment.

"It's no worse than other neighborhoods that we're in right now," said Anderson, a Parma native who now lives a few blocks from the Dream Neighborhood. "It doesn't scare me to work in that neighborhood. But it goes to the refugee resettlement agencies, their cooperation and collaboration."

Cleveland stands out

In May, during a vacant-properties conference in Detroit, a small group of land-bank leaders and public officials from Rust Belt cities gathered to talk about immigrants.

Representatives from Baltimore, Buffalo, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, Detroit, Syracuse and Toledo tossed around ideas for luring newcomers, stemming population loss and boosting their economies through neighborhood development.

On the subject of refugees, Cleveland had the most to say.

Since 2011, the Cuyahoga Land Bank has worked with the International Services Center resettlement agency to **renovate** seven houses. One house is in Lakewood. Two are in South Euclid. The rest are in Cleveland. An affiliate of the resettlement agency owns the houses and rents them out to refugees, who eventually aspire to purchase their own homes.

"I believe that Cleveland is far ahead of where other cities are in tackling this issue," said Steve Tobocman, director of **Global Detroit** and a participant in the May event.

"While there is widespread general support for connecting refugees and immigrants to our vacant properties, we haven't gotten much deeper than translating service materials into different languages," he said. "Councilman Cimperman and Cleveland deserve great credit around the Dream Neighborhood and the work the land bank has done around helping connect refugees and rehab dollars."

Old groundwork seeds new growth

Part of the charm of the Dream Neighborhood idea is that it relies on systems that already are in place.

Bango, the neighborhood housing coordinator, routinely works with lenders, the land bank and property owners to get empty houses into new owners' hands. There are models, from the International Services Center properties to Daryl Anderson's portfolio, that demonstrate refugee rental demand.

The new development is collaboration. And the people collaborating acknowledge that many of the Dream Neighborhood's details, such as investor financing and refugee access to public transportation, interpreters, health care and other services, haven't been worked out. A citywide workshop on refugee issues is being planned for Sept. 10.

"I'm kind of sitting on the edge of my seat, saying it would be so great to have this happen," said Karin Wishner, executive director of the International Services Center. "But nobody knows. This hasn't been done before, to my knowledge."

Mrosko, of Catholic Charities, is approaching the concept with a mix of hope and caution.

"Like anything," he said, "you need to build a solid infrastructure so that people have a good landing when they get here, from housing to schools to transportation to health care. We need to make sure that we provide the best care to these individuals who have been through a lot, to help them succeed."

On the heels of community meetings, Cimperman also is acutely aware of the delicate balancing act between welcoming refugees and helping existing residents, some of whom question what an influx of newcomers will do for them. Volunteers led by **Father Bob Stec**, the pastor at St. Ambrose Catholic Parish in Brunswick, are looking at ways to help cash-strapped and elderly homeowners fix up their houses.

After more than 20 years in the neighborhood, Ledger is championing for change. "I think it's about time," she said, pointing out three empty houses on her street while stray cats rubbed against her ankles.

She and her husband, a Vietnam veteran and longtime taxidermist with a shop on West 48th, have reclaimed empty land and secured grants to scatter the lots with vegetable gardens, fruit trees, picnic tables and birdhouses. They're planning to install a set of hoop houses soon, so that they can continue to grow produce and distribute it to their neighbors during the winter.

"Let's face it," she said, as her husband staked tomato plants. "Everything in this world's got to grow."



Art Ledger, 68, stands inside his longtime taxidermy shop on West 48th Street in Cleveland. If the Dream Neighborhood idea takes off, he hopes to gain support for transforming the space into an international museum showcasing a broad array of animals.

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