

## Community Partnership Award

POPULATIONS OF 10,000 TO 49,999

# FERNDALE, MICHIGAN

*ICMA's 2008 Community Partnership Award in the 10,000-to-49,999 population category goes to the city of Ferndale, Michigan, City Manager Robert J. Bruner, and The Lighthouse of Oakland County, Inc., and Judith Robinson, executive director for the Porch Light Partnership.*



ROBERT J. BRUNER

As a first-ring Detroit suburb, Ferndale, Michigan, was experiencing the effects of urban sprawl: people had moved out of what were once solid, middle-class neighborhoods, leaving empty houses behind. Because an abandoned or boarded-up house is clearly a blight on a neighborhood and negatively affects property values, the city of Ferndale, Oakland County, Lighthouse Community Development (LCD), and Paramount Bank formed a unique residential rejuvenation initiative called "The Porch Light Partnership" dedicated to improving neighborhoods one home at a time. The challenge was twofold: to provide affordable housing in quality housing stock and to prevent further neighborhood deterioration—two goals that are crucial to preserving, enhancing, and diversifying a community.

The Porch Light Partnership is an ongoing initiative that relies on numerous state, local, public, and private sources—a county-awarded \$415,000 HOME grant received by LCD, financing from Paramount Bank, and the assistance of local trades—to purchase and renovate city-identified homes in specific Ferndale neighborhoods. The partnership kicked off the project in January 2007 by investigating neighborhoods and possible properties; the first house was purchased, and renovations began in the spring. The city was called upon for additional Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding to assist with

lead abatement. LCD then purchased two additional houses, and renovations on all three houses were complete by late November. The goal was to have six totally renovated homes by the end of 2008.

Once renovated, the homes are offered at affordable prices to first-time home buyers. As an important component of the program, potential buyers can receive free financial education on how to purchase and maintain a home. The low- to moderate-income buyers who benefited from this program, and would not have been able to purchase a home otherwise, are now able to give their families a stable home environment that is part of a community, a school district, and a neighborhood where their children can grow up.

It is a recognized fact in home improvement that renovations on one house in an area will encourage renovations on other properties in the same area. Since March 2007, 15 permits were issued for work on other houses in the three neighborhoods where the Porch Light project homes are located. More than 20 candidates have participated in the home-buyer seminars conducted with LCD and Paramount Bank, and businesses are being approached to encourage their low- to moderate-income employees to participate in this program.

Because the partnership is a cooperative group of local and county government, private sector businesses, and nonprofits, it has the talents required to make this project a success. Each partner brings unique resources to the project. When additional funding was required, Oakland



**Renovated homes offered to first-time home buyers at affordable prices**

County brokered the deal to permit CDBG funds to be released through the city of Ferndale to complete the project. The open houses held to showcase the properties for potential buyers were advertised on the city's Web site and local cable TV channel. By cooperating and focusing on the goal of providing affordable housing to low- and moderate-income families, the partners were able to work through any minor difficulties quickly. It's the kind of program that other cities could easily benefit from—as Pontiac, Michigan, has done, building more than 110 new homes, rehabilitating 25, and using more than 180 grants and loans to facilitate repairs to owner-occupied homes in low- to moderate-income neighborhoods.

The Porch Light Partnership project is a win-win situation for all concerned, as it will improve neighborhoods, strengthen housing stock and values, and attract new residents to Ferndale. Future plans include increasing the number of community partners involved in the partnership, securing additional funding for further rejuvenation efforts, and developing additional projects—all with the goal of improving Ferndale neighborhoods one home at a time. ■