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Repairing despair

Nonprofit restores foreclosed homes in I.E. neighborhoods

By Rebecca U. Cho
Staff Writer

Walking through a San Bernardino home that had been sitting empty in foreclosure and now shines with fresh paint and granite countertops, Robert Hooker points to the baby grass just beginning to sprout from the newly landscaped backyard.

Hooker and the nonprofit organization he heads is all about new beginnings.

The group, Inland Empire Economic Recovery Corporation, takes foreclosed homes, many that have fallen into disrepair, and renovates them for sale to new homeowners.

The IEERC last year bought 38 bank-owned homes and fixed them up to sell them at market value. Now, a new agreement to purchase discounted homes in bulk from Fannie Mae is expected to accelerate the group's goal to place at least 100 vacated homes into the hands of new homeowners in 2011.

Hooker said he believes the IEERC is one of the few nonprofits with the "pool buyer" designation from Fannie Mae, which usually reserves the status for entities that can buy homes in bulk for \$50 million.

"They've seen we can do what we say, we're fixing them up, we're selling at a higher price, we've demonstrated that in the areas we've gone into we have stabilized real estate values," said Hooker, who is the corporation's CEO and executive director. "All those things were key factors in getting that designation from them."

A Fannie Mae spokeswoman did not return a call for comment. Through the arrangement, the IEERC will buy homes from Fannie Mae's Inland Empire inventory of bank-owned homes at discounted prices. The nonprofit has placed a bid to purchase 34 such foreclosed homes.

IEERC began in 2009 through an investment from San Bernardino County to slow the spread of blight and stabilize home values in inland neighborhoods. It now operates through a mix of public and private funds.

Home values in San Bernardino County have fallen by more than half in the wake of a housing downturn that flooded the region with foreclosures. From a peak of \$380,000 in November 2006, median home prices in March registered \$150,000, according to DataQuick, a real estate ser-



Photos by Micah Escamilla Correspondent

Robert Hooker, executive director and CEO of Inland Empire Economic Recovery Corporation, shows a house that is under renovation on Monday in Highland.



This kitchen is in one of the Inland Empire Economic Recovery Corporation's recently renovated homes in San Bernardino.

vices firm that released new numbers on Wednesday. Home prices have been hovering near that level since the fall.

The organization's efforts keep foreclosed homes from depressing home values for the rest of the neighborhood,

Hooker said. The San Bernardino home, at 4984 N. E St., was acquired from the lender at \$105,000 and renovated to a modern design of earth tones and dual paned windows in one and a half weeks. It will be placed on the market for \$179,900, a price near the value of other homes of similar quality in that block, according to Hooker.

The turnaround in renovation is rapid — about two to three weeks on average.

JoAnn Benjamin, who lives across the street on North E Street, said the group has helped improve her neighborhood. She can now look out of her kitchen window and see a nice home rather than an eyesore, she said.

"They did a beautiful job," said Benjamin, who has lived at her home for 50 years. "It looked like a dump."

A Highland home that has been vacant for eight months is the IEERC's next project. The property, which suffers from peeling paint, a broken back door window, and outdated kitchen, in two weeks will be transformed and ready for sale to a new family, Hooker said.

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