

Counties to receive \$2.2 million for housing initiatives

By Cindy Lee Cumpston and Steve Barrett | Posted: Friday, September 20, 2013 2:00 am

WAYNESBURG – Housing initiatives in Fayette, Greene and Washington counties will soon receive a combined total of more than \$2.2 million in funding, according to the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency.

PHFA officials recently announced the 2013 Pennsylvania Housing Affordability and Rehabilitation Enhancement Fund (PHARE) and Marcellus shale funding recipients that will receive a total of \$8.45 million. The grants are being distributed for 34 housing programs and projects across the state to groups in 22 counties to improve the availability and affordability of housing in the Marcellus shale natural gas drilling region of the state.

Of that \$8.45 million, Greene County will be allocated more than \$1.1 million for various programs, while Fayette will receive nearly \$433,000 for an ongoing housing initiative and Washington will receive more than \$663,000 for two projects.

“We are impressed this year with the diversity of quality housing programs receiving funding, reflecting the implementation of local solutions to housing challenges,” said Brian A. Hudson Sr., PHFA executive director and chief executive officer. “We’re also pleased to see counties taking a more comprehensive approach to addressing their housing needs, which is the approach we want to encourage.”

Greene County will be the recipient of \$1,114,164 for two grant applications submitted through the Greene County Redevelopment Authority.

The authority will receive \$600,000 towards the total \$1,495,000 it is seeking from a variety of sources, one of which is the PHARE fund, for its program to rehabilitate 23 parcels in the county.

David Mirkovich, the authority’s executive director, said, “The program will be used to benefit residents at or below 50 percent of the area median income (AMI) level.”

Commissioner Chairman Chuck Morris said, “We are very pleased to have this opportunity to give communities in our county some help with blighted properties and to get these properties back on the tax rolls.”

PHFA through the PHARE fund also awarded \$514,164 to Accessible Dreams, a nonprofit developer of accessible housing, and the redevelopment authority to construct four living units at 1392 and 1394 Jefferson Road in Jefferson.

Karen Bennett, administrator of the county’s Department of Human Services, explained that the authority will purchase the property and Accessible Dreams will be responsible for the construction of the units.

“We are very pleased at the quick response time to our application,” Bennett said, “We only made application in June and we are very excited to begin this project.”

The new four-unit structure will contain two fully accessible two-bedroom units on the ground floor for people with mobility impairments, and two additional two-bedroom units on the second floor for those needing affordable rental housing.

The two street-level apartments will be designed for wheelchair accessibility throughout, including zero-step entries, roll-in shower, wide hallways and accessible kitchen. All four apartments will include two bedrooms, one accessible bath, a powder room, living/dining room and kitchen and will be made available to qualified people.

Lucy Rooth, executive director of Accessible Dreams, said, “Referrals to the units will come through Greene County Human Services, the Southwestern Pennsylvania Area Agency on Aging (AAA), Tri-County Patriots for Independent Living (TRIPIL) and Accessible Dreams.”

Fayette County was allocated a total of \$432,810. Andrew French, executive director of the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority, said the authority applied for PHARE funding on behalf of the county’s ongoing Neighborhood Stabilization Initiative, which has the goal of “stabilizing communities that have been impacted by Marcellus shale drilling.”

“Through this grant, we aim to address a number of housing issues, including the acquisition and rehabilitation of properties being used for affordable living,” French said.

Targeted areas for the initiative include Connellsville, Uniontown, Masontown and Redstone, Dunbar and German townships.

French said the money allocated in the recent round of PHARE funds will be used primarily for ongoing housing initiatives in Redstone Township, including the construction of nine new houses.

The authority is also currently working with the nonprofit group Threshold Housing Development in the ongoing construction of 36 affordable housing units, also in the Redstone Township area.

French said families must meet specific requirements to qualify for occupying the new units, and eligible families will be identified over the next three to six months.

The authority hopes to have construction on the units completed by the end of 2014, he added.

This was the second round of PHARE funding that Fayette County has received. Last year, the county received \$300,000 for the ongoing Neighborhood Stabilization Initiative, French said.

Washington County also received PHARE funding for two projects.

The county's redevelopment authority was allocated \$606,500 for Century Plaza Apartments in North Franklin Township.

Century Plaza Apartments, the site of the former Holiday Inn motel, was purchased by the redevelopment authority in federal bankruptcy court and was converted into a complex for people 62 years of age and older.

Jim Hott, housing director for the redevelopment authority, said the complex opened in September 1994 and has since become "a very successful project with a lengthy waiting list" for people wishing to reside there.

The complex currently has 65 units, and the authority applied for PHARE funding to help pay for the construction of 14 additional one-bedroom apartments that are accessible to those with physical disabilities, Hott said.

The total cost for the construction of the new units is estimated at \$1.8 million. Hott said the remaining funding for the project already has been secured through other funding initiatives.

Hott added that the authority hopes to receive bids for the project by October, with construction to begin shortly after; it is anticipated that construction on the new additional units will be completed by late spring of 2014.

The other PHARE funding allocation in Washington County was earmarked for the county's Habitat for Humanity. The organization was awarded \$57,500 for the building of Habitat's 51st and 52nd homes in Washington.

The PHARE fund is authorized under the state Act 13 drilling law and utilizes unconventional gas well funds to assist with housing needs in any county where unconventional gas wells have been drilled.

PHFA works to provide affordable home ownership and rental housing options for older adults, low- and moderate-income families, and people with special housing needs. Through its carefully managed mortgage programs and investments in multifamily housing developments, PHFA also promotes economic development across the state.

Since its creation by the Legislature in 1972, it has generated \$11.2 billion of funding for more than 152,900 single-family home mortgage loans, helped fund the construction of 122,590 rental units, and saved the homes of nearly 46,700 families from foreclosure. PHFA programs and operations are funded primarily by the sale of securities, not by public tax dollars. PHFA is governed by a 14-member board.

"We expect this program funding to have a significant, positive impact helping counties address housing shortages resulting from the development of gas drilling in the Marcellus Shale region," Hudson said.