

County Commissioners unveil major economic development incentives

Luzerne County has long been known for innovation in funding for economic development. Back in the early 80s, when funding for the popular UDAG program was drying up, the County established an economic development Revolving Loan Fund via a float of CDBG funds.

The Business Development Loan Program (BDLP) has been a powerful tool for the County creating approximately 15,000 jobs to date through provision of in excess of \$215 million in loan funding. In 2005 the Board of Commissioners once again demonstrated that Luzerne County's innovation and commitment to economic growth is stronger than ever, through the release of a portfolio of new economic development funding tools, as well as a revitalized version of the original BDLP. The key focus behind the programs is the attraction of new business to the area, as well as strengthening existing businesses, thereby creating new employment opportu-

nities, generating additional tax revenues, motivating private investment and stimulating the overall area economy. Approved programs offer financing for activities meeting specific program requirements (see page 5). To obtain a profile for any of these programs detailing specific eligibility requirements, contact the Luzerne County Office of Community Development.

Since inception of these new programs, OCD Economic Development Specialist, Joseph Zeller, has been carrying out an extensive promotional campaign to insure that borrowers and lenders alike are aware of the incentives available through the County.

Through an extensive mail campaign, Joe has carried the message of the County's programs to lenders, attorneys, accountants, elected officials, economic development agencies and the business community.

"In order to attain the highest level of success with the County's economic development programs, a key

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Luzerne County's community development office has created 179 homebuyer opportunities for county residents.

The Office of Community Development for Luzerne County has spent nearly \$3 million on emergency shelters.

Luzerne County's community development program has created 393 units of affordable rental housing.

A Message from the Chair of the County Commissioner Board

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business park development, along with an assortment of other funding options. We believe these programs are groundbreaking at the County Government level, at least here in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Through the OCD-administered Revolving Loan Fund, these programs will make millions of dollars available to private businesses and area non-profits that intend to create job opportunities for Luzerne County residents.

Another major innovation this year has been the announcement of the Growing Homeowners Initiative, which is funded through the County's Housing Trust Fund, as well as the federal HOME Investments Partnership Program. This holiday season will find many Luzerne County residents enjoying the warmth and comfort of their own home, while many others look to 2006 as the year they too will attain their dream of homeownership.

The Growing Homeowners Initiative is a matched savings program that enables potential homeowners to build their nest egg to the level needed to cover downpayment and closing costs on their home. Participants also benefit from the training component of the program which addresses such issues as credit, budgeting, financing, and finding a home.

As depicted by the title, the program "grows" homeowners – not only financially, but in knowledge of

ownership related issues, thus insuring that attaining the American dream is a long lasting source of pleasure.

By maximizing the potential of the OCD, the County Commissioners welcomed Cardinal Glass to the area, aided in the revitalization efforts in downtown Wilkes-Barre, provided funding for local street improvements and recreation endeavors, and insured that the challenges faced by our residents are adequately addressed through our extensive public service programs.

The County's Open Space planning process, our future in tourism, removal of architectural barriers in County-operated facilities, are just a few of the current endeavors of this administration made easier by the Community Development Program.

As we move forward into the new year and the second half of this term we look forward to a number of new exciting initiatives, so keep watch for the next edition of "Luzerne County Community Development News."

In closing may I wish you all a safe, happy, and blessed holiday season and a prosperous 2006 for one and all.

Greg Skrepenak

Dreams of homeownership come true with Growing Homeowners Initiative

In late summer, 2005, the Luzerne County Board of Commissioners announced a housing initiative that is making dreams come true—at least if the dream is to own your home.

The Growing Homeowners Initiative provides a mechanism for potential homebuyers to grow their limited savings into a pool of dollars adequate to address their down payment and closing cost needs, while at the same time receiving training and guidance in the responsibilities of purchasing and owning a home. Within the first week of the announcement 100 applications were requested, a number which has now tripled. Currently there are over 100 households enrolled in the program, with the number growing weekly.

County residents with household incomes at or below 100% of the median income for the area who do not currently own a home are eligible to participate in the program. For example – a family of 4 with an annual income of \$51,300 or less would be considered income eligible. Once determined eligible, applicants establish a savings account and commence saving for their home. Participants must be in the program for a minimum of 90 days, and may remain in the program for as long thereafter as they feel necessary to achieve their goal. During participation in the program, they must attend at least 3 homebuyer readiness workshops, which include such topics as budgeting, credit analysis and repair, selecting a realtor, and mortgage financing. At closing, the County will match a minimum of \$2 for every \$1 saved by the property owner. Additional assistance, including rehabilitation money, may be available depending on household income.

This endeavor is funded, in part, through the County's Housing Trust Fund, which was established in 2001 by increasing the standard mortgage and deed recording fees by \$13. This increase is deposited in the Trust Fund, which is currently valued in excess of \$1.6 million and is utilized to fund the top tier of participants in the Growing Homeowners Initiative (81% to 100% of area median income), with remaining dollars derived from federal HOME and ADDI allocations.



Some homes in the award-winning Pine Street Neighborhood have been purchased with funds from Growing Homeowners Initiative.

"I will always be grateful..."

Thirty-one families have purchased homes to date, including five participants who purchased homes in the Pine Street Neighborhood.

Is it a dream come true? That is best answered by Elizabeth, a participant who sent a note of appreciation to the County after moving into her home: "...only you know how much went into my acquiring this lovely new home. It is beautiful and I will always be grateful for what you did. Thank you."

Program applications may be obtained by contacting the Housing Development Corporation, who carries out this program for the County, at 824-4803 or 501-1030. ■

Seasoned professionals with a personal touch at OCD office

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in early 1978. Pam oversees all public service activities, planning projects, and non-profit rehabilitation/ADA requests and represents the OCD on the Homeless Coalition. Environmental Specialist Justine Evancho works with Pam on the Public Service projects and also handles all Environmental Review and State Historic Preservation Requirements of OCD funded projects. Justine joined the office in 2001.

Municipal Projects Manager Peter Dougherty joined the staff in 1992 and handles all grant applications from Luzerne County boroughs and is also responsible for all

labor compliance issues associated with County funded projects. Municipal Coordinator Mark Hurst (1992) works with Pete and handles all grant requests from County Townships as well as oversees all demolition activities. The County's Grant Writer, Michele Sparich, came on board in 2004 as a member of the OCD staff.

When you call the OCD, the voice answering the phone may be either Rena Roberts (1993) or Sandra Kane (1999), who provide staff support throughout the office; and Bob Piorkowski is the man who keeps the building running and the mail moving. ■

"The OCD staff stands ready to help. If we don't have the solution, we will try to direct you to someone who does."