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Dearborn uses Web to draw residents

Record foreclosures prompt \$300K online and ad blitz to market area.

Darren A. Nichols / The Detroit News

DEARBORN -- Call it betting money on the house.

Michigan's moribund real estate market has Dearborn gambling \$300,000 in taxpayer money to recruit residents to the city of 100,000. Spurred by a record year of foreclosures, the city government is taking the unusual step of launching a Web site and marketing blitz this month to attract new residents.

That's a role usually filled by chambers of commerce or real estate bureaus, but new Mayor John "Jack" O'Reilly said the drastic economy calls for a bigger, untraditional bully pulpit to ballyhoo the city's services, schools and development projects and link home buyers to properties.

"We want to say if you haven't considered Dearborn, you're not working in your best interest," said O'Reilly, who made the site a top priority since taking office this year.

Many residents don't dispute the sentiment, but some question whether taxpayers should foot the bill -- especially when the city's finances are murky. Dearborn has cut 133 jobs in the past six years and used \$4.5 million in reserves to balance last year's budget.

"Is it good to promote Dearborn? Yes, but I'm sure there are other ways of doing it without costing us money," said resident Paul Kasper, 50, who has lived in the city since 1961.

"They need to take care of the city. I'm against spending any money except on operating costs. Right now, the economy is so bad, and there is nobody buying homes."

The initiative, which is highlighted by the launch of the feel-good welcomehomedearborn.com Web site, includes a marketing campaign beginning in spring aimed at young professionals and empty nesters.

It will include ads in relocation guides, magazines and newspapers and on radio.

Last year, nearly 1,400 homes in the city were foreclosed -- three times the national average. Metro Detroit ranks in the top five for metropolitan areas, with more than 70,000 from January 2006 to August, according to RealtyTrac, a real estate tracking service.

A quick drive through the tree-lined neighborhoods of Dearborn reveals the problem. Near Fordson High School, seven empty houses sit on Horger. Around the corner on Middlesex, high school students walk to school past a vacant apartment building.

Nearby, Mo Kadry lives next door to an empty home on Orchard. Another home sits across the street with a for-sale sign. It's a novel sight in Dearborn, a city that real estate agents say hasn't traditionally had houses linger on the market.

"Those (foreclosures) get me upset because it brings down the value of my house. It makes the whole block ugly," said Kadry, 23, who buys foreclosures and turns them into rental property.

Foreclosures are such a concern that Dearborn officials publicly reminded residents last week that burning down homes isn't a solution. The city issued a press release stressing that arson is a felony, but city officials quickly denied the problem exists. They couldn't supply statistics for the city, but offered figures in Wayne County that showed arsons fell to 1,500 in 2006 from 2,308 in 2005.

At welcometohomedearborn.com, visitors are given an overview about why people should live in Dearborn, which touts its location, services and housing value and that it's a safe and friendly place to live. The site also provides opportunities for people to participate in contests and sponsorships.

Site visitors are also given links about shopping, schools, churches and entertainment venues. Equally as important are links to homes for sale in Dearborn and job opportunities at its major employers such as Ford Motor Co. and Oakwood Hospital.

The site has already gotten hits from as far as China and places in Europe, said Margaret Blohm, one of the four businesswomen hired by the city to run the site. City officials said the Web site is estimated to cost about \$80,000.

Others involved in the campaign include Sandra Boulton of Boulton & Associates advertising and public relations agency; Millie Elson of Elston's American Speedy Printing; and Jackie McClure of JCI Design.

"The market in Dearborn is similar to everywhere else. It's no better or worse," said Thomas Korte, a lifelong Dearborn resident and real estate agent who served on the city's charter commission.

"(Dearborn has) a lot to offer, and for the longest time everybody knew that, but it seems to be thrown in the same mix with every other community (now). We're able now to have a focused approach toward letting people know (about Dearborn) and what they can come to expect as a homeowner. That's fantastic."