

Schumer: Save home rehab funds

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A year ago or so, the three-bedroom, two-and-a-half story house at 675 Post Ave. was a vacant blight on a lovely residential street in the 19th Ward.

Its copper pipes had been stripped, the electrical wires yanked by thieves and sold for scrap. There were boards over the windows.

The house was transferred to the city's Rochester Land Bank Corp. in mid-2014 and to the Rochester Housing Development Fund Corp. and the HOME Rochester program just a few weeks later. Rehab began soon after.

In coming weeks, that house, now fully updated and renovated, will be purchased by first-time homebuyer Shannon Singleton, a phlebotomist with the American Red Cross.

"The moment I walked inside, I knew this was going to be my house," said Singleton, who worked with the Urban League of Rochester and First Niagara Bank's First Home Club to help make her residential purchase dream come true.

But with devastating cuts proposed to a federal program that helps first-time buyers with down payments and closing costs and assists in refurbishing homes like the one Singleton is about to own, that dream is in jeopardy for countless others.

U.S. Sen. Charles E. Schumer visited Rochester on Tuesday to pledge his support for restoring some \$834 million in funds that were proposed to be slashed from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Investment Partnerships Program. The program gives annual grants to states and localities for buying, building and/or rehabilitating affordable housing for rent or homeownership.

Schumer called the cuts "perplexing, troubling and devastating."

He cited the success of the HOME Rochester program, which has rehabilitated and resold more than 630 formerly vacant homes in the Rochester area since 2002.

Over the past five years, HOME Rochester has received more than \$12 million in federal



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U.S. Sen. Charles Schumer poses with first-time home buyer Shannon Singleton in the home she's buying on Post Avenue.

money, leveraging another \$370 million in additional investments through mortgages, bank loans, private equity and other sources in order to rehab properties, build new affordable housing units and educate first-time buyers, Schumer said.

"I will do everything in my power to restore these cuts," he said, saying the stakes are too high when dilapidated vacant properties imperil nearby property values and threaten to destroy neighborhood cohesiveness.

"I will use everything in my power to get this program restored," he said, pointing to the freshly sided and painted Post Avenue home behind him. "This house pays taxes, this house keeps property values higher around the neighborhood, so they pay more taxes, this house keeps people in jobs so it makes sense to do these programs. Rochester has done extremely well, it is one of the great successes of the HOME program."

Rochester Mayor Lovely Warren said the funds are crucial to the city's neighborhood revitalization efforts.

"Rochester's poverty problem is well-documented and these funds are crucial to our neighborhood revitalization and community development efforts," she said. "Such a drastic funding reduction will have a significant negative impact on our efforts to bring safer, more vibrant neighborhoods, more jobs and better educational opportunities to our city."

Jean Lowe, president of the Greater Rochester Housing Partnership, which manages the local HOME program, said the program obtains houses via donations, tax foreclosures, and by purchasing

them from the Federal Housing Authority or Department of Housing and Urban Development.

HOME money helps underwrite the cost of repairs and renovations, and offset closing costs, she said.

"The homes we get are always vacant and usually the copper has been stripped out and the windows are broken and the house needs a new roof," she said. "We usually end up putting in a new kitchen, a new roof, a new furnace and hot water heater. Our goal is to put people in a house where they don't have to make big capital investments for a 10- to 15-year period. These are first-time home buyers who have lots of other expenses, and who are below the median income. We want them in a place that is safe and secure and where they don't have to immediately make big capital investments."

Singleton said HOME made it possible for her to consider becoming a homeowner.

"This program is the best," she said.

The same holds true for Franklyn Herrera, who will close on his new house off Driving Park Avenue in coming weeks. He said his rent is now nearly \$700 a month for a unit just barely big enough for him, his wife and their three children.

"I have to pay the bills every month, put food on the table every day and rent is very expensive," he said. His mortgage payments will be almost \$200 a month lower than his rent, and over time, owning a house means building equity and having a true stake in his neighborhood. "And that is very important."

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