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City OKs deal to rehab homes

By Ryan Hagen Staff Writer

SAN BERNARDINO Eight abandoned houses in the central part of the city will be rehabilitated and sold to first-time homebuyers, thanks to a deal signed just soon enough to avoid losing more than \$3 million in federal funds.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development gave the city \$3.27 million as part of its Neighborhood Stabilization Program but required the city to spend at least 50 percent of the money within two years — by March 8.

As late as Jan. 3, the city had spent only 10.5 percent of the money, according to a letter from William Vasquez, the director of HUD's Office of Community Planning and Development.

Then it signed a \$1.2 million agreement with the Housing Authority of San Bernardino County, which has fixed and sold more than 300 units in the county over the last 70 years.

The contract pushes the city over the 50 percent requirement and entitles it to use the rest of the money.

Efficiently spending it and getting proper approvals had been difficult because of issues related to the state-wide elimination of redevelopment agencies and the fact that people necessary for such programs were split among several departments, said Brandon Mims, the deputy director of a Housing and Community Development Department that was created in February to solve that problem.

"All of those things slowed government down," Mims said. "The restructuring made a very streamlined operation that reports directly to the city manager. It makes it very easy to get things done quickly."

Dan Nackerman, the president and CEO of the Housing Authority of San Bernardino County, said City Manager Allen J. Parker met with him on Parker's first day on the job last month.

"I was very impressed with that," Nackerman said, adding

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ing he expected the program to make a big difference for the city. "The houses) are in tough neighborhoods where they've been sitting empty for a couple years, so it's going to be a big improvement to these neighborhoods."

The houses are in the central part of the city, mostly within the borders of the 20-block Operation Phoenix crime-fighting project.

Several doors down from a boarded-up house where two-foot-high weeds partly

obscured graffiti, Jose Perez said he's seen the neighborhood's character change a few times.

"It's gone from bad to good and then to bad," said Perez, 18. "There are a lot of empty houses. That's one of the reasons we're getting out of here."

The initial phase is expected to lead to future rehabilitations of 20 San Bernardino homes that will be sold at market value, Nackerman said.

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