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## You can't pay them enough to leave

**A plan in Youngstown aims to move residents out of the city's most deserted areas. The hitch: Home owners won't budge - even for \$50,000.**

By Les Christie, CNNMoney.com staff writer  
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YOUNGSTOWN, Ohio (CNNMoney.com) -- When the city of Youngstown, Ohio, proposed incentives to move people out of declining neighborhoods, it sounded like a good idea - in theory.

The city hoped to lure holdouts living on nearly empty blocks and [relocate them to more lively areas](#), as part of its plan to remake itself in the wake of the steel industry's departure and the foreclosure crisis. It's already cleared some lots for things like playgrounds.

Now Youngstown wants to close entire streets and bulldoze abandoned properties so it can shut down city services like street lighting, police patrols and garbage pick-ups that it can no longer afford to maintain.

To do this on a large scale, the city needs to get about 100 residents to relocate. Each is eligible for \$50,000 in incentives - plenty, in this town, to buy a new home and move. The hitch: Youngstowners don't seem to want to leave their homes, no matter how blighted or abandoned the neighborhood may be.

"I'm East Side born and East Side bred and when I die, I'll be East Side dead," said Rufus Hudson, a director of work force development at Youngstown State University. "We love our side of town. The same people who watched me grow are watching my children grow."

Only one of the half dozen residents who have been contacted by the program since June agreed to relocate, according to Bill D'Avignon, the city's community development director. And in interviews with CNNMoney.com, another seven residents vowed that they too would stay on their deserted blocks.

The woman who did agree to move lived on a block filled with burned out homes, and a street that could easily be closed without disturbing traffic patterns. But she fell ill, and the move is now on hold.



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D'Avignon, who has been surprised by the resistance, said the city may have to up the ante to overcome the resistance, which seems to stem, in part, from community loyalty.

### A quiet neighborhood

Marie Rodriguez lives on the city's gritty South Side, next to a big empty lot on her right and vacant houses behind her. "That bothers me a little," she admitted.

There are only eight occupied homes left on her street, but she still likes living there. "It's pretty good, nice and quiet," said the retired cook. "I wouldn't move even if I was the last one on the block."

People are understandably attached to homes that they've cared for, and which hold fond memories.

"I put a lot of money in the house, and I raised seven kids here," said Rodriguez.

Another South Sider, Anna Maria Gay, has lived in Youngstown for 47 years and also won't be persuaded to move from her block. "I like the people here; I would never move away," she said. "It's very homey, not high class but not quaint either."

Youngstown's East Side was slated for development back in the 1950's, when the city's population was about 200,000.

But the neighborhood withered as Youngstown's population dwindled to about 80,000. Many of the houses that were built have been demolished, roads have gone un-repaired and others have been closed. Large wooded areas and fields - and even a 10-acre farm - lie within a 10-minute drive of downtown.

Arlette Gatewood, an 80-year-old retired steelworker and union official, has lived on the East Side since its heyday, and he too intends to stay in his home.

"Turning these mostly empty blocks into green spaces would be better for the neighborhood and cheaper for the city," he said. "But it's not *my* intention to ever move."

The area has too many memories for him to give up.

"I worked in the steel mills for 32 years, five months and 28 days," said Gatewood. "I came up at a time, graduating from high school in 1947, when the opportunities for young black men were limited."

But the mills were hiring. "We made good money," he said. "The work was hard; it was dirty."

Going home to the East Side after a tough day was pleasant, though. He remembers beer gardens, grocery stores and other retailers. These are gone. Now Youngstowners drive to the suburbs to shop.

### Patient city planners

The desire to stay put leads to some odd juxtapositions.

Take Meadow Street, which is near downtown. It's just a block long and the southern half of it will soon close when Fireline Inc., a ceramic molding manufacturer, takes possession. The company already owns most of the block.

But there's one holdout - a modest, wood-frame house a third of the way down the street. The Fireline plant, which employs 102 people, nearly surrounds this sliver of land where Nathaniel and Lulu Byrd live.

The company would like to take over the entire street, but for the Byrds.

According to Fireline, the couple has no intention of moving. "We've offered [the Byrds] ten times their home's valuation," said Gloria Jones, who founded the company with her husband.

But Nathaniel Byrd's mother gave him this house as a wedding gift. "They have a great deal of affection for the house," said Jones. "They want to stay."

So far city planners have been patient. Relocations are strictly voluntary, and the city intends to keep it that way - there are no plans to invoke eminent domain.

Meanwhile, the city has crafted plans for over 170 neighborhoods. In the Idora Park area, for example, near where an amusement park once stood, there are just a few occupied houses where the "entire swath of land should be open greenery," said community development director D'Avignon.

To make that happen, city planners may sweeten the deal - possibly offering to pay off small mortgage balances of \$20,00 or \$30,000.

They may have to, if they want any Youngstowners to move.


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