

Seniors

Board President Casey Kozlowski is MC at Senior Conference June 9.
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Land Bank

Conneaut couple transform eyesore into possible workshop thanks to Land Bank.
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Do you love Ashtabula County? Would you like to promote it to our visitors? Become an ACCVB Ambassador!
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Ashtabula County Board of Commissioners
25 West Jefferson St.
Jefferson Ohio 44047

Ashtabula County Insights

June 2017
Volume 1, Issue 4

Challenge course nears completion

Win-win.

That's the way Eric Frantz, manager of the county-owned Lodge and Conference Center at Geneva-on-the-Lake, describes the new Lake Erie Canopy Tours project being built to the west of the facility.

The 25-acre development is a win for the county because Delaware North, which manages The Lodge, is footing the bill for the \$1.6 million project. It is built on state park land, which Ashtabula County Commissioners leased from the state, in an agreement similar to the one their predecessors made for the five-acre parcel for The Lodge. The county is subleasing the land to Delaware North and will receive lease payments, Frantz says.

Beyond that, however, are numerous benefits to the local economy, including:

- The creation of 20 to 25 seasonal jobs;
- Sales tax revenue from ticket sales;



The Challenge Course is taking shape in the forest north of The Lodge and Conference Center, and will be joined by a zip line in the next few weeks.

- Construction of a welcome center-gift shop/snack shop open to all park users;
- An anticipated increase in corporate lodging/events as the Challenge section of the project

See Challenge, page 3

YOUR VOICE

President Kozlowski responds to citizens' questions



Q In what ways is the Board looking after Ashtabula County's senior citizens?

One of the ways is through the board's support of the Senior Services Levy.



Voters positioned Ashtabula County as a regional leader for funding senior services back in 2000, when they initially approved the five-year Senior Services Levy.

The levy has received strong voter support each time the levy committee returned to the voters for renewal of the 1-mill issue.

Ashtabula County is in the Ohio Department of Aging's Region 11. The other counties in this region are Columbiana, Mahoning and Trumbull. While each of the counties has a senior services levy, only Ashtabula has had one for 17 years.

Voters in the City of Ashtabula also approved a .3 mill levy for the Council on Aging in 2001; that levy also has received ongoing support from voters.

Decisions on how the Senior Services Levy money is spent rests with the Ashtabula County Commissioners' Senior Advisory Board. Charts showing the distribution of funds in 2016 are on page 3.

Do you have a question for Casey Kozlowski?

Call 576-3750 or email

crkzlwski@ashtabulacounty.us

Ashtabula County INSIGHTS

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To have Insights delivered via email, send an email to cefeather@ashtabulacounty.us to be added to the mailing list.

The current and previous issues are always available for download from the county's website, ashtabulacounty.us, and the Ashtabula Wave, ashtabulawave.org.

June 2017 meetings

6 9:30 a.m., Commissioners work session
1 p.m., Commissioners agenda meeting

13 10 a.m., Commissioners work session
10:30 a.m., Commissioners agenda meeting

20 10 a.m., Commissioners work session
1 p.m., Commissioners agenda meeting

27 10 a.m., Commissioners work session

27 **Andover Village Hall**
134 Maple St., Andover
Joint township/village meeting
6:30 p.m. open Q&A public session
7:00 p.m. Agenda Meeting

Bed tax funds ACCVB's marketing programs

On Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, when a guest checks into the county-owned Lodge and Conference Center, an employee or volunteer associated with the Ashtabula County Convention and Visitors Center (ACCVB) greets them and assists with directions, attractions and tidbits about our county.

This new Ambassador program is one of several creative projects aimed at marketing our county to visitors. On a recent Saturday, a family with a deep appreciation of wine expressed an interest in touring a winery and seeing some behind-the-bottle aspects of wine-making in Ashtabula County. Our ambassador pointed them to Markko Vineyard in Conneaut, drew out a route for them to follow on the County Visitor's Guide map and introduced them to the legendary Arnulf Esterer.

Another visitor was interested in purchasing an upscale lakefront home, and, again, our ambassador suggested neighborhoods to explore.

Many more examples of the value of making that personal connection could be cited, but the point is this: The program, which will eventually be staffed by trained volunteers who give four or more hours a month to promoting our county one-on-one, would not happen if it were not for the ACCVB, the bed tax that funds it and the Ashtabula County Board of Commissioners' support for these efforts.

Think of the ACCVB as Ashtabula County's marketing arm. As with any organization, promotion drives business and supports growth. The beauty of the ACCVB is that it benefits every citizen of the county, yet does not cost taxpayers. The CVB uses bed tax, *paid by the visitors*, to market the area and encourage people to visit. More visitors creates more bed tax and more bed tax creates more promotion to attract more visitors.

The Ohio Revised Code sets forth how this money is spent, typically to market and enhance a destination. An agreement with the Board of Commissioners ensures that the county's bed tax is used legally and effectively. The CVB is governed by a 14-person Executive Committee representing all areas of the county, different lodging property sizes and members-at-large. The organization creates and distributes an annual Visitor Guide, including a driving-tour map of Ashtabula County. In 2016, 90,000 copies were distributed.

The guide, however, is just the beginning. The CVB has a physical presence on Austinburg Road, at the Interstate 90/



Jayson Stoltz, tourism and web specialist for the Ashtabula County Convention and Visitors Bureau, points out attractions in the 2017 Visitors Guide while working an Ambassador booth at Spire Institute in May. Volunteers are needed for the Ambassador Program, which also provides information at the concierge booth at The Lodge and Conference Center at GOTL.



'Think of the ACCVB as Ashtabula County's marketing arm.'

Stephanie Seigel
ACCVB executive director

Route 45 interchange. The building is open Monday through Friday, and residents will find there information about our county, as well as all of Ohio. Stop in, request a guide and a free pen!

Spreading the word

A new advertising campaign rolled out in 2017 offers a 50% co-op match to members participating in a county branding program. The Bureau designs and places ads, shouldering the advertising task and stretching advertising budgets for members. Thirty seven different options are available and, through market research, the CVB is measuring the effectiveness of each placement to be sure that these dollars are spent wisely.

In partnership with local lodgers, the CVB is working with North Star to complete a customer study to understand exactly where visitors come from and how to effectively market to them. Once the results are in, the CVB

will share the data with members and county businesses/organizations to be sure everyone is spending smarter.

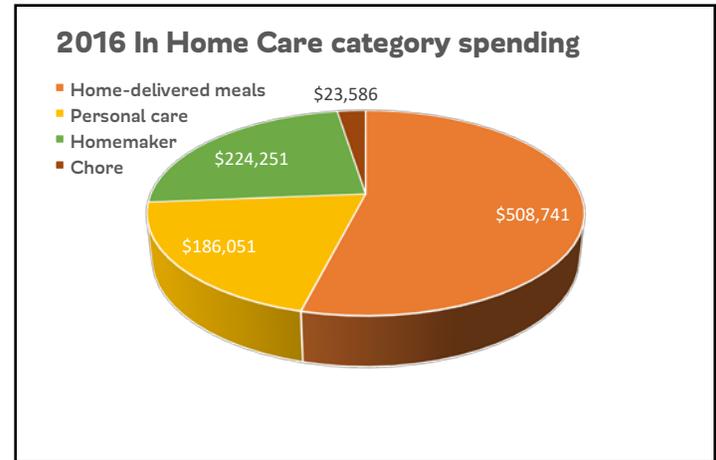
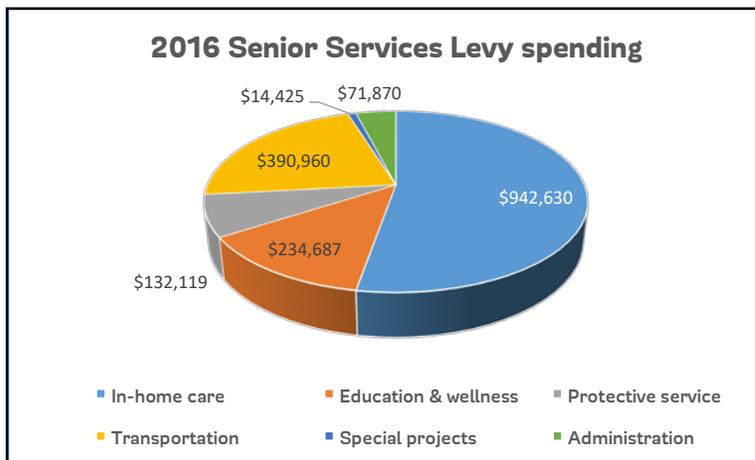
Shoot

Video cameras will be seen all over town for the next few months as the CVB gathers footage for a new video. Phase one will be debuted at the Annual Meeting in October and the complete video will be made available to members and groups throughout the county. These videos will be terrific promotional tools, paid for by our visitors!

Sometimes referred to as "the brand police," the CVB manages the county branding. Several A-icons highlight various elements of the county. Residents can stop by the office and pick up a free car decal, and business owners and marketing departments can access the county branding files and materials at no cost. The CVB represents Ashtabula County at a regional and state level, as well. The staff is engaged in special events, networking and tourism promotion throughout the year, always using the A's wherever they go.

The CVB continues to welcome ideas from the community. Persons interested in becoming a concierge ambassador at The Lodge or Spire Institute, should call (275-3202) or stop by the ACCVB, 1850 Austinburg Road. The bureau will offer its Ambassador training twice a year and hopes to have it up and running by July.

Senior Services Levy provides \$1.7 million in care to county's seniors



Challenge, from page 1

is used by companies for team building;

- Greater interest in The Lodge as a destination for Millennials, a demographic that eluded the facility's marketing efforts;
- A spectator-sport amenity that will draw the curious to the forest to find out what all the excitement is about, and perhaps make participants out of them.

Debbie Post, formerly retail manager for The Lodge, is one of those converts to the excitement of zipping through a forest on a line 50 feet or more above the canopy. She has been named the Canopy Tours manager.

"I have been on (zip lines) a couple of times, and it is exciting," she says.

Construction of the new amenity began in March. Frantz says the children's course and the Challenge Course are slated for a mid-July opening. The entire project should be open by early September.

The zip line course will have five towers, 10 tree platforms and four swinging bridges for a total of 3,000 feet. Participants will zip across the lakefront, along Cowles Creek and over the forest canopy at speeds of up to 30 mph. Heights of up to 60 feet are scaled. Although the line does not cross over the lake, it gets very close as it parallels the shore and crosses Cowles Creek just south of the bike trail bridge.

Thrill-seekers of all almost all ages will find plenty to enjoy on this course, a new venture for Delaware North.

"We want The Lodge to become a Millennial destination," Frantz says.

He says that the state-of-the-art safety system makes it a course that even an octogenarian could participate in. Every user will wear a harness that has a redundant clip system, so



the user is always attached to the cable by at least one clip.

The users will travel the course in packs of six to eight persons. A course employee will go ahead of the first person in the group to make sure everything is functioning properly. A second employee will always be the last person in the group to cross.

Frantz says tickets to the courses will be sold for two-hour intervals and tracked through colored-coded wrist bands. The zip line course will take about two hours to complete.

The children's course is in the Challenge area and features a scaled-down zip line that takes youngsters up to 5 feet above the forest floor.

Frantz says weight and reach, not age, determine which course a person can use. Children will need to be able to reach at least 60 inches to participate in their challenge course. Starting about age 10, the children will want to graduate to the lower level of the adult course.

For the adult courses, the participant must weigh at least 70 pounds but no more than 275 pounds.

Introductory pricing will be \$69 adult for the zip line; \$39 for the Challenge course. The child's course is \$19.

Frantz says the attraction will operate seven

days a week and open at 9 a.m.

"There is nothing about this that would keep us from doing this at night," he says.

"I can't wait to try this out," says Commissioner J.P. Ducro. "I know my family will love it and it will be a great asset to our community and visitors."

Commissioners stresses that the amenity will be open to the public, not just Lodge guests. Corporate use, special events and private parties, perhaps even tree-top weddings, could generate additional revenues.

"This is a viable business on its own," Frantz says of the new amenity. "But it also brings more people to The Lodge to stay overnight, so it's good for The Lodge."

And what is good for The Lodge is good for Ashtabula County. On a recent Saturday, The Lodge had more than 200 passengers booked on its four wine shuttles. Both weddings and cottage rentals are looking very strong for 2017. Come next year, the front of The Lodge will have a new look, a portico that will offer guests protection from the elements while unloading and loading their vehicles.

A \$9 per room resort fee charge on guest bills is funding the improvement. Frantz says the resort fee is dedicated to improvements and activities that will benefit guests. The improvements are mapped out on a five-year master plan for the grounds. New sidewalks, a restaurant fire pit and landscaping improvements already have been completed with revenue from the fee, enacted two years ago.

This fee relieves pressure on the Convention Facilities Authority's revenues, which in the past have been used to pay for enhancement projects. The CFA receives a 2 percent bed tax, and Frantz says that, thanks to the resort fee, the CFA is able to direct more of bed tax revenue back to the county for debt reduction on The Lodge—another win-win.

Airport project update:

On April 1, 2017, the runway and taxiways at Northeast Ohio Regional Airport were closed to allow for the reconstruction of Runway 9-27.

The \$8.5 million project is funded by a FAA Discretionary Grant, ODOT Aviation Grants and private grants from the Ashtabula County Aviation Capital Expenditures Trust, a donor advisor trust managed by the Cleveland Foundation.

The elements of the project include:

- Complete reconstruction of existing 5,197-foot-long runway;
- 703-foot runway extension,

5,9000-foot-long upon completion;

- Grooved runway surface to minimize water contamination, improve braking;
- New high intensity runway lighting system;
- New LED Precision Approach Path Indicator (PAPI) System, continuously lit for improved safety;
- New fully compliant Runway Safety Area (RSA);
- Relocation of Taxiway B to comply with new FAA design standard;
- Burial of utilities located on Brown Road.



Aerial view of the runway project area.

Monitor the project on Twitter at https://twitter.com/HZY_Rwy_09_27

Spanning the Senior Experience

Senior Citizens Conference is June 9

What started 10 years ago as an informational event for professionals has grown into one of the county's largest events for senior citizens.

The annual Senior Citizens Conference marks its first decade on June 9. The conference is at Lakeside High School, 6600 Sanborn Road, Ashtabula, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Registration opens at 9 a.m.

The Ashtabula County Board of Commissioners, Department of Job and Family Services (ACDJFS) and Ashtabula County Senior Services Levy sponsor the conference. Commissioners Board President Casey Kozlowski will serve as master of ceremonies for this year's conference. Also, commissioners will present a proclamation recognizing the event's first decade of service to the county's senior population.

Lee Ann Walters, supervisor with the ACDJFS, says attendance is typically in the range of 250 to 300. Continued growth in attendance has necessitated increasingly larger venues. It started out at Kent State-Ashtabula when the focus was on educating professionals about services and issues surrounding the county's senior population.

"A lot of people just didn't know what senior services are available in Ashtabula County," Walters says. "(ACDJFS) got this conference going so professionals would know about them. Over time, it has grown to where it is now mainly devoted to seniors and their



families." The county's senior centers are busy places in May and June as they honor the county's senior citizens with luncheons and entertainment. The Geneva Senior Center held its event May 31; entertainment included the center's Off Your Rocker band.

families."

Informational sessions that help seniors make the most of their lives and plan for future needs are at the heart of the conference. Regional professionals present the 45-minute sessions. The sessions begin at 10:30 a.m. and are held concurrently, so a participant can attend two of the three sessions.

The 2017 Conference options are:

- Body and Mind: How to Age Gracefully (presented by physicians);
- Taking Care of Tomorrow (insurance, living wills, chore-homemaker services, home-delivered meals, guardianships);
- Safety in Today's World (avoiding scams, cyber safety, home safety).

See Conference, Page 6

County's Land Bank powerful weapon in blight battle

For 30 years, ever since Don and Kathy Watson have lived on Daniels Avenue in Conneaut, they've tolerated an abandoned, eyesore property for a neighbor.

"It was a mess," Don Watson says of the dilapidated basement with a flat roof, at one time a Grange hall. "We did mow the grass, but we didn't keep it as good as our grass. (The holding company owner) did have it brush hogged, but brush was growing all over the building and you couldn't see the building for all the stuff that was growing over it."

When the property finally came up for a delinquent-tax sheriff's sale two years ago, the couple submitted a bid but it was below the minimum. After the unsuccessful sale, they contacted Melissa Harvey, executive director of the county's Land Bank, and explored options for acquiring the property from the corporation.

A year ago this month, the Watsons took ownership of the parcel and began clearing the accumulation of brush and refuse from the land. Don hired a contractor to put a pitched roof over the basement, and he and his wife are exploring the structure's potential. A woodworker, Don is considering moving his workshop into the building and providing a space for Kathy to do her crafts.

For now, they are just pleased to have the eyesore gone. "We didn't know what was going to happen after the sheriff's sale," Don says. "We just envisioned more years of nothing happening over there. The Land Bank was a real good thing."

They just walk away from their homes

The Land Bank transferred its first delinquent vacant parcel of land on Oct. 14, 2014. The transfer was made by sale to an adjacent homeowner who took possession of the nonproductive parcel, cleaned it up and has paid taxes on it ever since acquisition.

Since then, the Land Bank has transferred 67 parcels to successful applicants, assisted with the demolition of 65 vacant blighted houses and assisted in the transfer of several blighted commercial properties. These include a former gas station in Austinburg Township that was transferred to the Ashtabula County Port Authority and the former Benson's station in Geneva, which is being transferred to the city. Amanda White, the city's zoning inspector, worked with the Land Bank to acquire the property, which has great economic development potential for the downtown.

"Amanda is great (for Geneva)," Cragon says.

Geneva has at least two "high-profile" Route 20 properties that will come under the NIP. Harvey says action on those properties has been delayed due to potential buyers investigating restoration. However, in each case, the property's deteriorated or contaminated condition has precluded cost-effective renovation.

"In general, it is three to four times more expensive to repair these houses than it is to demolish them," Harvey says.

Cragon says many of the houses that come under NIP have been vacant for extended periods of time, have floors that are caved in and simply are beyond fixing. Photos hanging on the wall of Harvey's office show the deplorable condition of the interiors, with rooms piled high with refuse.

"They just walk away from their homes," Cragon says. "In one of the houses, they had left their breakfast on the table."

Three short years

The Land Bank, known officially as the Ashtabula County Land Reutilization Corporation, is a powerful blight remediation tool at the disposal of the Board of Commissioners and other county economic and community development personnel.

Dawn Cragon, Ashtabula County Treasurer,

er, did the research and legwork necessary to create the Land Bank, incorporated three years ago this month. At that time, it was one of a dozen land banks in Ohio. Harvey says Ohio now has more than 40 land banks and predicts the number will continue to grow as residential blight is here to stay.

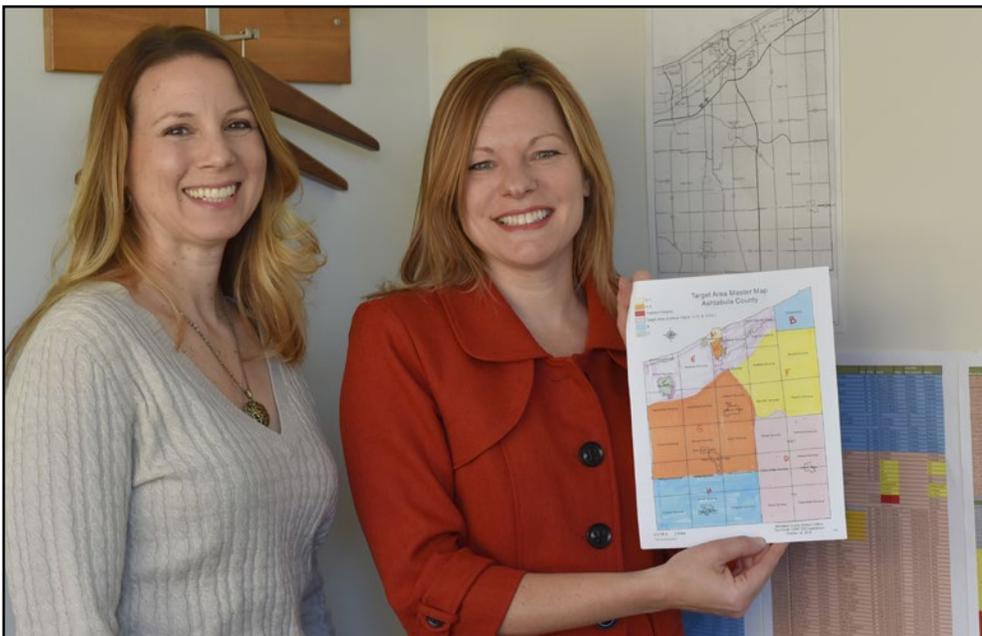
"I get calls all the time from other treasurers asking how we did it," Cragon says.

The Land Bank and Treasurer often field calls from property owners who want to know how the tool can be used to address eyesores on their block.

"Between the Treasurer's office and the Land Bank, we receive at least five calls every day on how the Land Bank can help take care of an abandoned property," says Cragon, who chairs the Land Bank. "I assist Melissa with investigating the ability to acquire the property, whether through the Treasurer's tax foreclosure or the owner's donation or signing the deed over in lieu of foreclosure. I also help research the applicants to make sure they are qualified under the Land Bank's Code of Regulations."

Harvey is executive director of the Land Bank, a position she's held since it was formed in June 2014.

Cragon's motivation for creating the land bank was the problem of residential blight and the large number of these properties that fail



Melissa Harvey (left) and Ashtabula County Treasurer Dawn Cragon hold a county map that indicates areas where the Land Bank has acquired properties. Call the Treasurer's Office for more information on how the Land Bank can assist with blighted real estate.

Bank, continued from page 5

to attract buyers when they go to tax foreclosure sales. The blighted buildings are a liability that land buyers don't want to deal with, and the taxes and penalties mount while the value of the property, and those around it, plummet. Meanwhile, the county, school districts and other entities are deprived of tax revenue from the properties.

"Often times, a parcel of property accumulates delinquent taxes in amounts much higher than the value of the property," Harvey says. "The title cleaning abilities of the Land Bank are crucial to be able to make that piece of property marketable once again."

Significant wins, expansion

Just two months after it was organized, the Land Bank was awarded \$500,000 of Neighborhood Initiative Program (NIP) grant funding through Ohio Housing and Finance Authority. Harvey says this money is used to reimburse demolition expenses for vacant blighted houses in targeted neighborhoods.

Having a land bank in place is a requisite for receiving NIP funding. Since the Land Bank received the initial \$500,000, it has been awarded four additional rounds, totaling \$3,850,768.68. Cragon says the awards were based upon the Land Bank's successful administration of the NIP program.

That money could bring down up to 150 blighted homes in Ashtabula County, say Cragon and Harvey. But this success story will not be theirs alone to celebrate.

"We could not have done it without our NIP partners, primarily Ashtabula City, along with the cities of Conneaut and Geneva and the County's Community Service and Planning Department," Harvey says. "The City of Ashtabula essentially wrote the initial grant and had the highest volume of houses referred to us for demolition, due to its being the largest city in the county. County Community

Land Bank directors

Dawn Cragon, chair

Jim Timonere

Debbie Friedstrom

Janis Dorsten

AC Board of Commissioners

President Casey Kozlowski

Vice-President Kathryn Whittington

Commissioner J.P. Ducro

Service and Planning wrote the additional grant language to extend our grant application beyond the three cities and we are excited to offer the NIP program to several townships and villages, with being others submitted for consideration soon."

Cragon says that the seven-member Land Bank board agreed to seek permission to expand the program after discovering that the Ohio Housing and Finance Authority had approved census areas for land banks in other Ohio counties. Cragon says the OHFA approved the county's application for an area in just 38 minutes. The area takes in Andover Village and seven township below Route 6 and east of Route 11.

"We sent out letters to the different townships and village in the area, and we have received some input back," Harvey says. "We are actively seeking to work with these communities to get the best applicable properties covered by the grant."

The NIP process differs from the typical land bank transaction because in the latter, the Land Bank usually will not begin the process of clearing title and obtaining ownership until an end buyer is engaged. A typical scenario is an occupant-homeowner who wants to acquire an adjacent lot with a large tax liability. One of Harvey's favorite success stories is of a Harbor resident who acquired an extra lot formerly occupied by a blighted drug house. The homeowner now grows fruit and vegetables on the lot.

However, NIP properties must be held by the Land Bank for three years after demolition before the property can be sold to an adjacent owner-occupant for a nominal cost. In 2017 the guideline changed to allow non-owner-occupied adjacent property owners to purchase vacant land at market value after demolition. To make it easier for adjacent-property owners to acquire a lot, the Ashtabula County Land Bank is looking at an innovative program.

"We are hoping to implement a 'mow to own' program, since purchase at market value may not attract neighboring property owners to purchase the property," Harvey says. "Once approved by the Land Bank Board, this would allow us to lease the property to an individual for a fee which could be reduced if they mow and maintain the lot for the period of time we must own it after demolition."

The Land Bank is holding some 70 properties. Harvey says they do not publicize the locations because these parcels have become targets for dumping everything from barrels of toxic chemicals to junk cars.

So how do you find out about what is available? Harvey says the Land Bank is not a real estate agency. In most cases a neighbor has dibs on the property, and it is often a neighbor who starts the ball rolling on an acquisition. So if you know of a vacant, blighted house (not a mobile home or commercial structure) in your neighborhood, contact the Land Bank to see if it qualifies for NIP demolition.

"Additionally, if you know of a vacant, tax-delinquent parcel which you would consider owning and you are current in your own taxes, contact the Land Bank for an application so we can determine if it is eligible for acquisition through the Land Bank," Harvey says. "If so, we can begin the due diligence process, usually via tax foreclosure."

COMMISSIONER QUOTE

Conference, from page 4

A popular service that was first offered last year, the technology room, will be open from 9 to 10 a.m. and again from 12:30 p.m. to closing. Seniors can bring cell phones, cameras, tablets and other electronic devices for which they need assistance configuring or operating. This free service will be provided by Great Lakes Communication.

"There is more and more grandparenting over a distance, so they can help seniors set up Skype on their devices and stay in touch,"

Walters says.

The vendor room provides a forum for businesses and nonprofits to share information about services and products. The room opens at 9 a.m.

Walters says that the conference has received wonderful support from area businesses, and gift certificates to those businesses will be among the door prizes drawn starting at 1:45 p.m.

Free lunch is the prize that every participant is guaranteed. Lunch is served at 12:30 p.m. There is a choice of egg salad, turkey and

cheese, or ham and cheese sandwich, which will be paired with chips or pretzels, pasta salad, beverage and dessert.

Registration for the free event closed on May 26, however Walters says they won't turn away a senior who is just now learning about the conference and lunch. Call 994-1240 to make a late registration. ACDJFS will even provide free transportation to the event through a participating service. Walters encourages residents who do not have transportation to check with their local seniors center for assistance or Country Neighbor.