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By IKE MGBATOGU

Contributing Writer

COLUMBUS – The numbers tell the grim tale about this crumbling neighborhood in Columbus.

But Mayor Michael Coleman's effort to revive the community tells a hopeful story of a leader's resolve to rescue a part of his city from deepening impoverishment.

About 850 homes in this Columbus South Side neighborhood are either vacant or abandoned. That sums up to 1 in every 5 homes, most of them probably contributing to the neighborhood's blight and decay. A settlement House building was on the throes of becoming the 851st abandoned property in that neighborhood but Coleman stepped in to stop the bleeding.

"It is unacceptable to let this community slide into abyss," said Coleman. "The call to action is to save the South Side."

Apparently, that call starts with the mayor's decision to acquire the 20,000-square foot property located at 310 E. Innis Avenue.

The settlement house, which has provided social services to poor city residents for the past 112 years, recently closed its doors after wobbling through years of dire financial difficulty that detrimentally impacted operation.

The collapse of the agency left the building virtually unused and headed for the roster of abandoned buildings. But Coleman would not allow that to happen, deciding to acquire the property for the city, to prevent further decay of a neighborhood already wallowing in morose.

Having acquired the building and prevented one more structure from being listed in a catalogue of abandoned South Side homes, what's Coleman going to do with it?

"Demolish or rebuild it," he said.

But, in his eyes, that is really beside the point of doing this. Coleman explained that he views the takeover of the building as the start of the city's comprehensive effort to rebuild the South Side and purge its glum.

"It's going to be gifted to the city, and should there be a need to rebuild the building – or demolish and rebuild it – we will," said Coleman. "We want to look at this from a broader umbrella and not just the building."

Coleman said future plans for the property, which is still undetermined, will involve the entire community including the private sector, community social services agencies and residents, who will now receive the services previously provided by the settlement house at the Community Development for All People, a nonprofit agency that provides similar services.

The ultimate crumble of the settlement house had been a concern for many for a while. Just this past summer, the city resuscitated the moribund agency back to life after dolling out $50,000 to keep it running.

It finally ran out of gas.

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