Sherrie Tussler had grown tired of her view: a fire-damaged house across the street from her home on Milwaukee's near west side.

The vacant, boarded-up house was hurting the value of other homes on the block. And the city, with its backlog of demolition orders, wasn't going to be tearing it down for some time.

So, Tussler made an offer to the city: sell her the badly damaged house for $1 and provide a $25,000 grant.

In return, Tussler would restore the house — a project that ended up costing around $150,000.

The result is a renovated three-bedroom house at 3405 W. St. Paul Ave., listed for sale at $154,000 — and the model for a new city policy to replicate that development.

"Frankly, this project is almost a miracle," said Ald. Robert Bauman, whose district includes Tussler's Merrill Park neighborhood.

Tussler said it's not a miracle — just the result of someone who enjoys remodeling old homes and is motivated by both self-interest and a desire to serve.

"I had been looking at this burned-out house for years," Tussler said. "It just devalued all of our properties."

The fire occurred in December 2016.
No one was injured. But the two-story house, built around 1890, was condemned by the city.

By January 2019, when the city took ownership through property tax foreclosure, Tussler had been hounding the Department of Neighborhood Services to demolish the building.

One annoyed department official finally told Tussler's brother, a contractor, that Tussler herself should buy and remodel the house.

That official used a word, beginning with "b" and rhyming with "witch," to describe Tussler.

She was nonplussed.

"I am a bitch," said Tussler.

More importantly, aside from her day job as Hunger Task Force executive director, Tussler has remodeled other houses.

That includes her current historic home, at 3402 W. St. Paul Ave., and previous homes when she lived in Wauwatosa and the Walker's Point neighborhood.

Tussler has rehabsed two other houses in the Merrill Park neighborhood. She is renting out one house, at 333 N. 34th St., to a family, and has another, at 3224 W. Mt. Vernon Ave., listed for sale.

"It's kind of a weird hobby," she said.
So, the Department of City Development last year recommended the fire-damaged house’s sale for $1, with an accompanying $25,000 forgivable loan to help pay for restoring it. The Common Council approved the sale in May.

The fire-sale price and grant made sense for the city, Bauman said.

"Basically, we gave her a loan in an amount a little more than what it would have cost (the city) to demolish the property," he said.

A demolition would have left the city with a vacant lot generating no property tax revenue.

Tussler wouldn't commit to the project without city financing help.

That reduced the risk that she would lose money on reselling the property once the development was completed. Most of her financing for the restoration came from a home equity loan.

The house needed a lot of work.

Tussler got inside the building in June, a month before taking ownership.

She found food, furniture and other stuff, including Christmas decorations, that had been left behind.
"It's moldy, it's stinky. Plaster falling off the wall," Tussler said.

She did much of the work herself on evenings and weekends, even taking a week of vacation to spend on the project. That helped control the costs.

Tussler's contractor brother, John Tussler, worked on the remodeling.

She also hired others, including an electrician who's a high school classmate and a couple of roofers John Tussler found working on another Merrill Park home.

Tussler also saved money by purchasing plumbing fixtures, tile, doors and trim at Community Warehouse. It sells donated building materials at discounted prices.

The project's first phase involved removing damaged fixtures and household goods, some of which was "just frightening," Tussler said.

"We had to use a pitchfork in the upstairs bedroom. Plaster had fallen and had become one with the carpeting and the clothing," she said.

The renovations saved a staircase, some interior trim and the original siding — minus the fake brick facade that had been added later.

Tussler said her updates included "architectural shingles to create a historic effect and a couple of lightning rods for fun."

Also, the house's paint job is an homage to Paul Jakubovich (http://archive.jsonline.com/news/obituaries/paul-jakubovichs-passion-was-preserving-city-history-b99415654z1-286891661.html/), a city historic preservation planner who died in 2014. He taught Tussler about respecting old homes.

The house has just been listed at $154,000 with Dave Rosenlund of Realty Executives.

"I like to create, but this house was made to sell," Tussler said. "It's just a fat money pit for now."

Meanwhile, city officials are pleased with the outcome.

They're changing Milwaukee's Housing Infrastructure Preservation Fund to try to replicate Tussler's project with other city-owned properties.

The fund was created in 2010 to preserve small residential and mixed-use buildings that the city acquires through tax foreclosure.

It focuses on buildings that are historic, architecturally significant or essential to neighborhood integrity.

Since 2010, $4.55 million in city funds has been provided to the fund. That's paid for renovations to 57 properties — with 43 completed buildings sold and the rest still being listed for sale, according to the Department of City Development.
Typically, the department seeks bids from commercial contractors for the fund's projects.

Granting a forgivable loan to Tussler was an exception, said Yves LaPierre, of the department's real estate staff.

Meanwhile, the department has been getting fewer bids as contractors instead pursue more lucrative deals, LaPierre said at a recent Common Council Zoning, Neighborhoods and Development Committee meeting.

The committee endorsed a proposal from Mayor Tom Barrett's administration to change the fund to allow similar forgivable loans of up to $50,000 for other city properties.

The Common Council approved that change Tuesday on a 15-0 vote.

The fund has around $133,000 available for projects in 2020.

LaPierre told committee members that department officials hope to do loans of around $25,000 to $30,000 for each project.

"It'll be another tool in our toolbox," he said.

Bauman, a committee member, said Tussler's project cannot be replicated on a large scale.

"This is not a program that can be easily duplicated across the city," he said at the committee meeting. "But DCD can provide flexibility for buyers willing to do projects with little or no profit.

"The key is finding additional Sherrie Tusslers out there," Bauman said.

Tussler wants to do additional projects, financed with the city's forgivable loans, on the near west side.

The St. Paul Avenue development combined her own interests with that of the broader community.

"I just try to be a responsible person and a good neighbor. It seemed like the right thing to do," Tussler said.

"And, since it's a hobby, it wasn't hard to do. I just walked across the street."

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