

City staff takes ideas from blighted property committee

By Jen Fifield News-Post Staff | Posted: Thursday, August 28, 2014 2:00 am

City of Frederick officials are working on mending their relationship with residents, business owners and land-use professionals who have specific ideas on how the city should fight blight.

Mayor Randy McClement reunited the city's blighted and vacant property committee Wednesday to explain to committee members what the city has done since the committee made its recommendations two years ago and to get feedback.

Recently, some committee members told city officials that they are unhappy with the way the city is addressing the issue.

While the city doesn't have a widespread blight problem, a few key properties have been vacant and blighted for years, and the city takes the issue seriously, said Richard Griffin, the city's director of economic development.

The 15-member committee includes residents, land-use professionals and city staff. Of the 10 members who are not city staff, six were at the meeting, along with eight other residents and business owners.

At the meeting, committee members insisted that a property should not have to be vacant to be blighted.

The city defines a blighted property as one that is unoccupied and is a serious or immediate danger to the health, safety or general welfare of the community. The property must also have open code violations. The city is using the definition to move forward with receivership, in which it will take owners of blighted properties to court to appoint a receiver to the property.

Rachel Depo, assistant city attorney, said the city defined a blighted property as one that is unoccupied so that it could start small and maybe make changes to the law to include occupied structures in the future.

Two residents told city staff that many residents are unfamiliar with city code and don't know how to tell if a property is blighted.

While a property can have numerous code violations, such as a broken window and peeling paint or habitual vacancy, it doesn't mean it is blighted, city staff said.

Nikki Bamonti, the mayor's executive assistant, said people with questions should call the city, and often do.

Committee members said the city should be doing more to actively market its voluntary remediation process for code violators, its housing counseling programs and its eminent domain process.

While the city has defined four properties as legally blighted, residents at the meeting encouraged the city to make public the 30 or so other properties on its "watch list." These are properties that have numerous code violations and are on their way to becoming blighted.

Ned Bond, owner of Da Black Cat on North Market Street, suggested that the city send a warning letter to the property owners on the watch list as a way to encourage compliance.

Residents at the meeting also suggested that police and code enforcement work more closely to address issues at properties. Dan Hoffman, the city's code enforcement manager, said he has been working on setting up new training with police.

McClement said the city will implement many of the ideas given at the meeting.

Leaving the meeting, Steve Cranford, a commercial broker on the committee, said he thought it went well, but the city still isn't addressing the issue to the extent he would like.

Another committee member, Mike Bowersox, a commercial property owner, said it is clear that the city is working diligently on the committee's recommendations.

City staff and committee members agreed that the toughest issue to address is how to deal with properties that may be vacant and blighted but do not have any open code violations.

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Questions?

City of Frederick residents with questions regarding vacant and blighted properties can call code enforcement staff at 301-600-3825. To report a code violation, go to www.cityoffrederick.com or download the city's app, called "iSpires," from online smartphone stores.

Recommendations

A summary of the 2012 recommendations from the city of Frederick's blighted and vacant property committee:

1. Develop and adopt a property receivership program.
2. Formalize and strengthen a blighted building database.
3. Formalize and strengthen cross-training and information sharing among city departments.
4. Develop a top 10 blighted residential property blotter.
5. Develop a voluntary violation remediation program.

6. Enhance marketing of housing counseling programs.
7. Provide lien or fine waiver for the new owner of a blighted property.
8. Develop a smartphone app for code violations.
9. Enhance code enforcement resources.
10. Develop targeted reinvestment zones/tax credits.
11. Develop and effectively market the process of eminent domain.
12. Develop and adopt escalating fine system for code enforcement.
13. Develop and adopt a blighted building property tax.
14. Support blighted property-nuisance abatement state legislation.