

Vacant property security plan

Zoning, Neighborhoods and Development Committee

September 17, 2019

Vacant property security plan

- Council file 181491
 - Devise plan to reduce negative impacts of vacant houses owned by City of Milwaukee
- Participating departments
 - DCD, DNS, MPD, Office of Violence Prevention



What causes vacancy?

- Foreclosure crisis
 - Abandonment of property
 - Properties languish on the market in neighborhoods with little or no demand
- Falling population
 - Lack of demand leaves properties vacant
 - Overall housing market weakens
- Cost of maintenance and operation of property exceeds the value of the property
 - Longer property is vacant, the higher the cost of renovation
- Aged housing stock can't compete with newer, more modern units

Impact of vacant houses

- Property values fall in surrounding neighborhood
 - Vacant, blighted property is a “negative amenity.”
- Social cohesion is reduced
 - Neighbors feel isolated and helpless. Fewer “eyes on the street.”
 - Vacant buildings symbolize “no one cares.” The problem is out in the open, for all to see.
 - “Can’t build community with vacants.”
- Criminal activity
 - Loitering, theft, squatting, more serious crimes.

Crime analysis - 2018

- At various points in the year, City owned 1230 improved, vacant properties
- Per 2018 MPD data
 - 81 incidents occurred at or near a City-owned vacant property
 - 28 incidents clearly occurred on premises of a City-owned vacant property
 - 1 homicide
 - 2 sexual assaults
 - Arson (8 incidents)
 - Shell casings found in yard or adjacent alley (6)
 - Burglary, theft, damage to property (6)
 - Armed robbery of City workers or contractors at property (2)
 - Arrest for possession of dangerous weapon (1)

Strategies to counter negative impacts of vacant properties

- Selective demolition of vacant properties, combined with:
 - Neighborhood improvement initiatives
 - Vacant lot improvement initiatives
- Improve appearance and security of vacant properties.
- Simplify the sale of vacant properties to new owners to rebuild neighborhood confidence.
- Engage neighbors.

Recommendations

Reduce the inventory

- Increase the pace of demolition and deconstruction (\$\$\$)
 - 350 City-owned properties recommended for demolition
 - 30 demolished through July 2019
- Repeal deconstruction ordinance
 - DNS Commissioner to determine when deconstruction is best method to raze City-owned property
- Expand incentives such as Milwaukee Employment/Renovation Initiative to buy, renovate and reoccupy multiple vacant properties (\$\$\$)

Recommendations

Secure and protect the asset

- Fund regular monitoring activity (\$\$)
 - Private security firm
 - DNS monthly vacant property monitoring program
 - “Gig economy” monitoring (e.g. Task Rabbit)
- Install solar-powered security lights (\$\$)
- Require developers asking DCD to “hold” properties to monitor property conditions
- Adopt ordinance changes to speed sales
 - Automatically list all vacant houses for sale
 - Allow direct sales of properties on raze list, even if property was not previously listed for sale.

Recommendations

Educate, engage and empower neighbors

- Restore funds to artistic board-up program (\$)
- Create tools that simplify problem reporting
 - MKE Mobile app
 - Refrigerator magnets, etc.
- Provide grants to neighborhood groups to organize vacant lot clean-up and improvement (\$)
- With partners such as Safe and Sound, block watch groups and Alert Neighbor Program, educate neighbors about how and why to report problems observed at vacant properties