

Vacant Building Registration Program

Background

There have been many studies done that show significant correlation between vacant buildings and increased calls for service for police departments, higher incidence of fires (both accidental and intentional), and decline and disinvestment in neighborhoods. From those studies it is clear that vacant buildings represent not only a clear drain of valuable governmental resources but also create significant reduction of the quality of life for the surrounding neighborhood.

Many communities have had significant successes in stabilizing and improving existing neighborhoods through the registration and aggressive monitoring of vacant properties. Through the registration process, locations of vacant buildings are shared with public safety organizations so that they may be prepared for the hazards associated with the property. Additionally by studying the density of vacant buildings, strategies can be developed for code enforcement efforts as well as policing initiatives.

As part of a successful registration/inspection program information is shared with planning and housing agencies so that strategic reinvestment and development strategies can be incorporated into a comprehensive approach to impacted neighborhoods.

Proposal

Currently Milwaukee has an ordinance in place that deals with vacant and boarded residential properties. The ordinance permits such buildings to exist in a boarded condition for six months before the properties must either be un-boarded or renovated or sold. There is an exception to this requirement in which historic buildings can be mothballed. While this has been successful in more positive economic times, we are finding that more properties are sitting vacant for an extended period of time while they are awaiting sale. Additionally this ordinance does not deal with non-boarded residential properties nor does it address commercial properties. It is believed that this strategy needs to be supplemented a vacant building registration and inspection program.

It is believed that the following elements should be incorporated into such a program:

1. Any building that is vacant should be registered with the City. A threshold should be established for how long it can be vacant before the registration would be required. Many communities pick a range of 30 to 180 days. It is recommended for Milwaukee to use 30 days as the criteria. An exemption for buildings undergoing active renovation should be considered. Upon registration, the address should be shared with the MPD, MFD, and DCD.
2. The registration should be renewed every six months.
3. The building and property shall be inspected by DNS as part of the registration and inspection process. The inspection should consist of both an interior and exterior evaluation.

4. Criteria should be established for the inspection standards. The should include tall grass, trash and litter, inoperative vehicles, securing of all openings, weather tightness of the exterior envelope, structural integrity of the exterior and interior, elimination of all fire loading and sources of ignition, ect..
5. There shall be a base fee for registration and renewal. Presence of building, fire, zoning, or environmental violations would result in doubling the fee. Subsequent renewals whose inspections yield similar violations would result in tripling the fee. A third renewal with violations would result in quadrupling of the base fee. The fee would remain at the quadruple fee level until a renewal occurs that demonstrates that no violations exist. This fee approach is to cause a deterrent to vacant buildings that are not maintained in accordance with code.
6. Periodic monitoring of vacant properties will occur by the district inspector between renewal inspections.
7. It is proposed that the base fee be \$250. The fee would not be charged for the initial six month period.

Fiscal Analysis

There are currently 300 known vacant commercial buildings. This information comes from the fire inspection cards that have had 2 inspections failed due to lack of access. In addition there are 1000 vacant residential properties that have either been boarded up for over six months or properties coming out of the pre foreclosure program. It is anticipated that number of properties will coming out of the pre foreclosure program will only increase of the next several years.

If we use the numbers of 1300 properties being registered and only applying the base fee of \$250 every six months the revenue resulting would be \$650,000. During the start up period this number would be \$325,000 since fees would not be charged for the first six months. To staff this initiative it would be necessary to add four code enforcement inspectors and 1 office assistant II at a cost of \$284,092.