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Local News

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Neighborhoods

City Neighborhoods

Cutbacks leave city-owned abandoned buildings, vacant lots untended

Neighbors complain of overgrown lots, rodents, crime

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By Rich Lord and Diana Nelson Jones, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The city of Pittsburgh, because of budget cuts, isn't properly maintaining hundreds of abandoned buildings and thousands of vacant parcels it owns.

The result is overgrown lots, infestation by rodents and drug users and prostitutes moving in.

Neighbors of the city's eyesores are losing patience.

Lashawn Matthews, a home health aide, lives a few doors down from two city-owned houses, 606 and 608 Beltzhoover Ave. The city seized both in 2003 after owners consistently failed to pay taxes.

On two recent visits, the weeds in front were chest high and littered with junk-food wrappers. Both houses were unlocked and the front door of one was wide open. Furniture debris lay within view of the doorways.



Darrell Sapp, Post-Gazette

The roof has gaping holes in the kitchen at 608 Beltzhoover Ave. The city seized both this and 6060 Beltzhoover in 2003 after owners consistently failed to pay taxes.

On two recent visits, the weeds in front were chest high and littered with junk-food wrappers. Both



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"I put padlocks on there. The crackheads take them off," said Ms. Matthews, 37. "They turn tricks. They smoke crack. They're like squatters."

Although the inventory of 326 buildings and 3,819 pieces of land owned by the city has been about the same for years, the resources the city can put into maintaining them has shrunk.

Thanks to budget cuts:

- The contractor that cuts grass and cleans lots for the city did approximately 5,000 cut-and-clean jobs in 2003, but only an estimated 2,500 this year, meaning one-third of city-owned lots are going untouched.

- The crew that boards up empty city-owned houses has been slashed from five workers in 2002 to two today. As a result, some houses sit wide open for months, inviting illicit use.

- City demolitions of condemned properties dropped from 293 in 2003 to 90 last year. Though they bounced back to around 260 this year, that isn't enough to dent a backlog of 1,000 condemned buildings, including 98 owned by the city and its Urban Redevelopment Authority.

"We happen to own a lot of property," Mayor Tom Murphy said last week. The city has tried "to prioritize all of the lots we own and to cut them regularly and maintain them," he said.

"On the abandoned houses, I've had great frustrations with that," he said, claiming budget cuts forced by the city's fiscal crisis thwarted his administration's demolition efforts.

"I've called down to the mayor's office many times, but they do nothing," said Ms. Matthews, who said the raccoons that clamber out of the upper floors of the city-owned properties near her home walk across the rooftops and scratch at her window screens.

Last year, police arrested a man on a charge of marijuana possession in the building at 606 Beltzhoover.

The properties in Ms. Matthews' neighborhood are among those that city officials hope to sell to community groups. The question is when.

"The plan is for those two units to come down," said Rick Belloli, executive director of the South Side Local Development Co., which is building homes on another block of Beltzhoover Avenue.

But redevelopment of those properties is on the back end of a 50-house

houses were unlocked and the front door of one was wide open.

Furniture debris lay within view of the doorways.

[Click photo for larger image.](#)

More on Pittsburgh's eyesores

- [Three Terminal Cases](#)

- [Tax liens delay redevelopment efforts in city neighborhoods](#)

project. "We want to make sure the market responds" before building more than eight units, Mr. Belloli said.

Adding to the challenge is \$3,500 in old tax debt on the two properties that is owned by a private company, Capital Asset Research Corp. That debt has to be paid off before the properties can be redeveloped.

The city puts some 2,000 tax-delinquent properties a year up for auction at quarterly treasurer's sales. About two-thirds of the property owners pay off their debts at the last minute or during a grace period after the sale. New buyers purchase a few others. The city evaluates the rest and decides which ones to seize for sale or eventual redevelopment.

Once it takes them, the city is responsible for maintenance.

The city pays a nonprofit contractor, South Side-based City Source Associates, to clear weeds, mow grass and pick up trash on seized properties. The 17-employee contractor does similar work for the URA, which owns about 1,400 properties.

City Source doesn't have the funding to mow every lot regularly, said its executive director, Bill Harlak. It is only able to address problems when neighbors complain.

"Right now I probably have 500 complaints sitting on my desk," he said - enough to keep his crew busy through January.

In 2004, the city paid City Source \$837,000. That is down to \$550,000 this year, causing the dramatic drop in lots serviced.

Another cut is expected next year, possibly to \$400,000, said city Public Works Director Guy Costa. "We should be spending \$850,000 to \$900,000" on lot cleaning, he said.

The URA pays City Source and another contractor \$300,000 to maintain its lots and buildings, down from \$500,000 in 2002.

The two-man city crew struggles to keep its abandoned houses boarded up.

"We have to continuously re-board because people use them for homelessness or drugs," said Mr. Costa.

"I'm basically operating on a complaint basis," boarding crew foreman Bill Killcrece said one day on the Hill District's Dinwiddie Street.

The city owns five houses on Dinwiddie's 200 block. One had no front door, another burned a month ago in a fire that started in a drug den next door, and the rest had shattered first-floor windows. Alerted to the problems by a reporter, Mr. Killcrece and his lone subordinate began measuring the openings for boards.

Eighty-four city-owned houses and 14 URA-owned buildings are now

condemned. They wait in a line of 1,000 such buildings.

The queue of the condemned was down to about 850 in 2003, before budget cuts caused it to balloon, said Bureau of Building Inspection Chief Ron Graziano. The demolition budget plunged from \$2.1 million in 2003 to \$535,000 in 2004, before recovering to \$1.9 million this year.

The city can afford to tear down about 258 houses this year, but that's barely enough to keep pace with new derelicts, Mr. Graziano said. "We condemn almost as many as we raze."

The city seized a home at 2170 Wylie Ave. in 1997 and sold it to the URA last year. It was condemned last November but collapsed before the city could get to it, damaging Eagle Taxi's fleet of cars parked next door. The URA's insurer paid the company \$8,000 for the damage.

The ultimate goal -- selling the properties to taxpayers -- requires manpower. The city had five employees doing that job in 2000 but has just three doing it now. It has seized 111 properties this year and sold 166 parcels, including 55 with buildings, most of which were seized in previous years, according to the Finance Department.

Sometimes a private investor saves the city the trouble.

Carol Peterson, a Lawrenceville resident of 13 years, has bought and restored seven houses in her neighborhood since 1996. She is working on buying her eighth.

Last June, a property near her home was up for treasurer's sale. If the city got stuck with it, she said, the eyesore would have plagued the street for at least 18 months, given the state of city maintenance efforts and the pace of demolition. "It had serious structural issues," she said.

She bought the house and converted it back into a single-family home, as she has done with all but one of the others.

"Within a couple days of advertising it for sale," she said, "I found someone who wanted it."

Elizabeth Monoian, who moved to Lawrenceville from New York three years ago, bought the building, a five-bedroom Victorian row house that she and her sister intend for artists-in-residence projects.

Ms. Monoian said she was in negotiation with the city's real estate division to buy another house, which she calls "a massive dump that's going to need a lot of work."

"I'd like to see every abandoned property taken by the city," said Kendall Pelling, the planning and acquisitions coordinator for East Liberty Development Inc. City control "puts them closer to being productive."

Mr. Pelling's organization teams with the Highland Park Community Development Corp. to buy properties such as the one at 5435 Stanton

Ave.

The city bought that house in 2003 and agreed to hold it for the Highland Park group. The transfer is in limbo while the buyer tries to figure out how to pay off \$13,664 in old tax debts, plus interest, owed to Capital Asset.

Meanwhile the property sits partially boarded up, with tires and trash on the porch, its downspout on the ground and a pile of bricks attesting to the collapse of one of its two chimneys.

Next door is the pretty white house with purple trim that Jacquelyn Lewis bought in 1991 and has steadily fixed up. She shares it with a 21-year-old daughter and 2-year-old grandson.

Ms. Lewis, a Pittsburgh Public Schools reading coach, tries to keep her grandson away from the vacant property, and has considered putting up a fence. But, she said, "if that [second] chimney falls, it won't matter if there's a fence there."

A City's Eyesores: Three Terminal Cases



Darrell Sapp, Post-Gazette

3034 Glen Mawr Ave., Sheraden

A four-bedroom frame house built in 1925, this was bought by the city in 2002, and is condemned.

This property ended the 29-year career of Allegheny County Jail guard Bill Metz, 54, who lives nearby. While running to get his young son away from a street fight in September 2004, he tripped over the shattered

sidewalk in front of this house and suffered a disabling shoulder injury.

He sued the city in September. Only after that did the city fix the sidewalk. "They're worse than the slumlords," he said.

The city also owns two condemned houses across the street. They are covered with graffiti, pigeon-infested, their lots strewn with debris including a shopping cart. Christina Bupp and her two children, ages 5 and 1, live in a house between them. It's "kinda crappy," she said. "Makes it hard to keep this one looking nice."

"Rodents are still there, rats," said Denise Snell, who lives next to one of the houses. "If I'm thinking of selling my property, how do I sell it with that next door?"

228 Dinwiddie St., Hill District

The city took this sprawling four-bedroom, 3,800-square-foot house following a treasurer's sale in 2004. It is next to new houses built with help from the Urban Redevelopment Authority and sold in 2000.

Four visits by reporters found no front door and multiple missing windows. Inside were a couch, lighters, bottles, blankets, rubble and broken furniture.

It's one of five city-owned houses on that block, all of which could be entered through broken first-floor windows or open doors. Neighbors say some of the properties get frequent visitors, and call them "abandominiums."



Darrell Sapp, Post-Gazette
Click photo for larger image.

"Right now those places are being used as either crack houses, or [for] prostitution," said Bonnie Laing, a college teacher and mother of three young children who lives a few doors down from 228 Dinwiddie.

"That's a crack house and a trick house," said Wilbert Washington, who lives across the street from 228 Dinwiddie.

The public works crew assigned to boarding up houses said it had not been made aware that the property was city-owned until it was alerted by a reporter.



Darrell Sapp, Post-Gazette

4903 Penn Ave., Garfield

A squat, gray brick building with red awning, once a membership club, this was bought by the city in 2002, and is being held for Friendship Development Associates. It is condemned.

Capital Assets Research Corp. holds \$17,360 in old tax debts, plus interest.

"It's a public health hazard now and it'll be a no-man's-land" when it's razed, said Joe Edelstein, who owns the building beside it. "It'll be a vacant lot in Garfield with \$20,000 worth of [tax] liens."

His company, Wylie Holding, recently renovated the adjacent 4901 Penn into artists' lofts and has rented them all.

Of the eyesore, he said, "There's no roof and it's in horrible disarray. It has black mold and is a health concern. We had to remediate mold from our property. I wanted to control the outcome but I got no response from [Capital Asset]."

He said he was willing to buy it, but not to pay the \$20,000 in back taxes and interest. "The city took the highest of roads, to go ahead with demolition despite the fact they don't have clear title."

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