

**OFFICE OF THE CITY COUNCIL**

**CHERYL L. BROWN** 117 WEST DUVAL STREET, SUITE 425

DIRECTOR 4TH FLOOR, CITY HALL

OFFICE (904) 630-1452 JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA 32202

FAX (904) 630-2906

E-MAIL: CLBROWN@coj.net

**AD HOC COMMITTEE ON JACKSONVILLE’S NEIGHBORBOOD BLIGHT**

**May 16, 2014**

**9:00 a.m.**

**City Hall**

**117 W. Duval St., 1st Floor**

**Lynwood Roberts Room**

**Attendance:** CM Denise Lee, CM John Crescimbeni, CM Warren Jones, CM Jim Love, Karen Bowling

**Excused: CM** Bill Bishop

**Also**: Council President Bill Gulliford; Janice Billy – Council Auditor’s Office;Paige Johnston – General Counsel Office; Dan MacDonald – ECA District 8; Jeff Clements – Council Research

See attached sign-in sheet for additional attendees.

Council Member Lee called the meeting to order at 9:13 a.m.

CM Lee began the meeting with introductions from the committee and attendees. She provided a brief description of Neighborhood Blight and Human Blight Ad Hoc Committees.

Council President Gulliford thanked the committee for its great work and said that if the next Council President extends the committee, he would be interested in serving. He is meeting with a national non-profit corporation to explore the possibility of developing a process for mass foreclosures of abandoned properties with banks that now hold the properties and want to be rid of them. He will announce a noticed meeting in the near future.

**Old Business**

1. **Streamlining lien and foreclosure process** – Council Member Love stated that Loree French of the General Counsel’s office has been exploring opportunities for improvement of the system and is looking at two possible foreclosure routes – either one-by-one or in large batches – and also an improved tax deed process, using an initial sample group of 50 vacant lots identified by the Real Estate Division. There will be multiple solutions depending on the specific nature of each piece of property. A flow chart of the various processes is being developed with a cost estimate for each avenue. Costs per lot will vary widely depending on the number and amount of liens each has accumulated. Public Works Director Jim Robinson added that the department’s ongoing property management study could be of assistance in identifying parcels.
2. **Trespass authorization form –** JSO Assistant Chief Tony Davis (Zone 5 Commander) reported that execution of a “trespass authorization form” by a property owner gives the JSO authority to stop and question a person for a legitimate reason on that property and question why they are there. Councilwoman Lee requested statistics on how many businesses have been contacted about the trespass authorization forms, how many have signed, and how many have not. The JSO has been going door-to-door in targeted high crime neighborhoods to seek information on criminal activity and to spread the word about the department’s gun bounty program. Chief Davis said that the JSO has also arranged for the posting of No Parking signs in front of some problem stores so that there will be no parking in the public right-of-way at those locations.
3. **School issues –** David Kaufman of the Duval School District Police Force reported that School Superintendent Nikolai Vitti is very supportive of the committee’s actions and has appointed Paul Soares, the district’s Chief of Operations as his liaison to the committee. He said that there are school resource officers assigned to many middle and high schools and that they work closely with JSO to handle off-campus crime issues. The Sheriff has authorized the school police to have jurisdiction off-campus within 1,000 feet of school properties. Councilwoman Lee requested a list of problem stores near schools that can be targeted for use of the trespass authorization letters. Mike Williams, JSO Director of Patrol and Enforcement, said that there is good cooperation between the Sheriff’s Office and the school police on security issues, truancy round-ups, and the like. Councilwoman Lee requested a list of the top 10 problem schools. Director Williams stated that the types of behaviors the committee is interested in preventing are very movable - intensive enforcement in one spot drives the problem to another location until intensive enforcement there moves it on to yet another location.
4. **Creative solutions to vacant property issues** – Kim Scott, Director of the Department of Regulatory Compliance, distributed a packet of articles about creative efforts taking place in other cities to deal with the universal problem of vacant and unkempt lots. The ideas included such activities as changing the state law in Indiana to keep profiteers who buy and hold properties tax deed properties without making any improvements from being eligible to purchase more tax deeds; a Detroit program to sell abandoned lots for $1 to get them back on the tax rolls; a land bank ordinance in Pittsburgh that makes it easier for a non-governmental organization to dispose of city surplus lots; and an Indiana program to use federal mortgage assistance funds (with a special waiver) to demolish abandoned buildings. Council Member Jones suggested exploration of whether the City can give priority in its property sales to owners with a concrete plan to improve and use or sell those properties and not to simply hold them as vacant land looking for a big return someday in the future. Ms. Scott was asked to review these ideas with Council Member Love’s subcommittee and bring back concrete recommendations.
5. **Demolition ordinance –** Cherry Shaw of the Office of General Counsel has produced a draft ordinance that reduces the minimum waiting period to demolish abandoned, boarded-up buildings from 36 to 24 months, except for designated historic structures, buildings with active building permits, or buildings actively for sale or rent. The committee discussed the difficulty in developing a practical, enforceable definition of when a building is “for rent” that will achieve the desired end. Jay Higbee of Foland and Higbee Realty said that there are many buildings listed for sale on the Multiple Listing Service for prices that will never be achieved, so the simple fact of an MLS listing is not a good indicator of a property realistically being for sale. Ms. Lee appointed Council Member Jones, the Code Enforcement Division, the Real Estate Division, Cherry Shaw and Jay Higbee to constitute a subcommittee to discuss these issues.
6. **Car Wash Regulations –** Robert Prado, Acting Chief of the Code Enforcement Division, distributed a handout with the current ordinance and citation process for car washes, of which there are 2 types – commercial (fixed site) and mobile (including temporary setups on lots), allowed by right in CCG-2 zoning districts and by exception in CCG1. Mr. Prado described the enforcement process, which begins with site visits, a first warning, citations, then graduating to civil injunctions and ultimately a special magistrate hearing. Chairwoman Lee assigned the car wash issue to Councilman Crescimbeni’s Human Blight Subcommittee. Council Member Jones suggested that Code Enforcement inspectors should be checking on the certificate of use and the business license as their first order of business when they inspect a mobile carwash – if they don’t have those two documents, then clearly a violation is taking place. Kim Scott stated that it can be easier to enforce regulations on a parcel that has a building than on a vacant lot. The presence of a building means that building inspection and the City fire marshal can get involved and, if violations are identified in the building, the JEA can be directed to cut off electric and water service which can help pressure the property owner to deal with the car wash operator. She also noted that DART (Drug Abatement Response Team) enforcement is triggered by arrests at the site for criminal violations. Mr. Prado stated that Code Enforcement does not have the power to issue “cease and desist” orders; only Building Inspection and the Fire Marshal have that power. Mr. Prado and Karen Bowling were asked to come up with ideas for how to implement cease and desist orders against car washes.
7. **Neighborhood Database Report –** Daphne Colbert of the Planning and Development Department distributed a sample of the department’s new neighborhoods database. The system will be available first for internal City use then eventually rolled out for public access. The information can be sorted and searched in a variety of ways, including by type of organization, zip code where it is located, City Council district, CPAC, etc.
8. **Hendersonville Real Estate Report –** Paul Tutwiler of the Northwest Jacksonville Community Development District said he sees great opportunities for improvement in the Hendersonville area (bounded by I-95, Myrtle Avenue, 7th Street and 20th Street) if several pockets of concentrated problems can be overcome. There is a large pocket of liens in the northwest corner of the area along I-95 between 13th and 17th Street and Moncrief Road, and the map shows that many of the parcels throughout the area have at least one, if not more, form of adverse condition (liens, abandoned, foreclosed, tax reverted, etc.).
9. **13th and Moncrief apartments –** Robert Prado reported that the Code Enforcement Division was finally allowed to inspect the interior of 6 apartment units at the site and has condemned one as uninhabitable due to fire damage. The division will re-inspect the units on June 2nd to determine if all the violations have been remedied; if not the citations will be referred to the Code Enforcement Board for action. Paul Tutwiler has met with the owner of the apartments and his CDC has offered to purchase the property. Council Member Lee thanked Mr. Prado for the progress and hoped for a final resolution soon.

**New Business**

1. **45th Street and Avenue B convenience store** – Chairwoman Lee briefly described the poor condition of the convenience store at 45th Street and Avenue B – broken fence, rundown lot, persistent loitering, etc. The owner of the property is uncooperative and has made no response to numerous complaints and contacts about the condition of the property. Mr. Prado reported that he had written a citation yesterday to the property owner (not the business operator) for the dangerous condition of the fence and for trash and debris on the lot. Council Member Jones said that he had dealt with a similar situation in his district by having the property rezoned to PUD, which allows specific conditions to be imposed. Folks Huxford, Chief of Current Planning, said that PUD zoning must be agreed to by the owner, but that property may be down-zoned without the owner’s concurrence. Chairwoman Lee directed the Planning Department to initiate the process for a rezoning to PUD and to inform the owner.

**Public Comment**

Several citizens made comments on the following topics: questions and comments about the deteriorated condition of various downtown buildings; problem convenience stores; the problems of blight are symptomatic of bigger economic problems; how can communities be repaired and improved rather than simply tearing down problem buildings; attitudes need to change; failures to fulfill the promises of consolidation, particularly in the north/west area of the city.

CAO Karen Bowling said that she will compile a list of all of the blight committee’s accomplishments to date.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 12:02p.m.

Jeff Clements, Council Research Division (904) 630-1405

Posted 05.19.14 4:00 p.m.