

Blighted Property Review Committee
Tuesday, October 21, 2008
Minutes

Members Attending: L. Olsen, W. Bealer, M. Candelario, M. Wolfe

Staff Attending: V. Spencer, J. Khokhar, L. Kelleher, M. Mayfield

Others Attending: J. Kromer, E. Weiss from FELS Institute and D. Spatz Rdg Eagle

Mr. Olsen called the meeting to order at 6:15 p.m. He announced that a quorum was present.

Public Comment

Mr. Olsen opened the floor for public comment. No one present expressed the desire to address the Committee.

Agenda and Minutes

Mr. Olsen called the Committee's attention to the minutes from the August and September meetings and the agenda for this meeting. He stated that the minutes were distributed earlier via e mail and are attached to the agenda.

Ms. Wolfe moved, seconded by Mr. Candelario, to approve the minutes from the August and September meetings as presented and approve the agenda for this meeting.

FELS Institute

Mr. Olsen suggested that all present introduce themselves to Mr. Weiss and Mr. Kromer. After introductions, Mr. Olsen explained the BPRC's progress to date. He stated that the forums held with the Allentown and Harrisburg BPRCs were highly educational and helped the Reading BPRC define their goals and understand the BPRC process. He explained the rationale used to select individual properties along with a target neighborhood and area.

Mr. Weiss stated that before joining the FELS Institute, he was the director of the Allentown Codes and Housing Department. He explained the work Allentown has performed to cure their blighted property issues. He noted that in Allentown the Redevelopment Authority handles housing and that commercial economic development is handled by outside entities. (In Reading the Redevelopment Authority handles commercial redevelopment along with Greater Berks and the BEP).

Mr. Kromer stated that before joining the FELS Institute he was the director of Philadelphia's Housing Department under Governor Rendell.

Mr. Weiss stated that Allentown is one of the only Pennsylvania cities that has not experienced a decline in population in over 50 years, due to their location close to the New York and New Jersey borders. However, the prime location of Allentown has caused a rise in rental properties.

Mr. Kromer stated that the FELS Institute responded to the City's RFP on housing and were selected to assist the City in handling its problems with rental housing. They were asked to help the City build a strategy and develop action steps to address housing issues. They are currently meeting with departments and with Boards, Authorities and Commissions who handle housing issues. Options will be presented for the City to review.

Ms. Kromer and Mr. Weiss congratulated the BPRC for their work to educate themselves on the different models used to address blighted properties. They expressed the belief that the City has the proper parties in place to successfully handle the current housing problems. They noted the need for their work to also include education in court preparedness.

Mr. Weiss stated that he and Mr. Kromer have reviewed the properties and areas selected by the Reading BPRC. He noted his agreement with the selection of the area that ties Entertainment Square with the Buttonwood Gateway. He suggested focusing on the 12-16 worst properties in the area to avoid becoming overwhelmed. He stated that this more focused effort will increase the BPRCs success rate.

In response to a question from Mr. Olsen, Mr. Kromer stated that the FELS Institute will be working with the city until approximately June 2009.

Mr. Olsen asked Mr. Bealer how the Planning Commission reacted to the FELS

Institute presentation. Mr. Bealer replied that the Planning Commission was positive but somewhat mixed.

Mr. Olsen noted the positive attitude and leadership skills of the BPRCs in Allentown and Harrisburg. He stated that these groups greatly assisted the Reading BPRC in understanding the "taking" process.

Mr. Kromer stated that generally BPRC's seek to have properties rehabilitated, with demolition only used when the cost of rehabilitation outweighs the benefit of the reuse. Mr. Weiss agreed noting that the BPRC should not feel obligated to own properties but to remove blighted properties that affect the quality of life in the remaining neighborhood or area. He suggested that the BPRC update their list annually and record progress regularly. He again suggested that the BPRC focus on 12-16 severely blighted properties in the target area. He stated that on average surrounding property owners rehabilitate their own properties when they see how unresponsive owners are handled.

Ms. Mayfield inquired about the size of the Allentown Codes Department and how staff assists the Allentown BPRC. Mr. Weiss stated that the Codes department is composed of 8 PMI's who perform property inspections of rental properties every 5 years and one inspector who responds to property complaints. Ms. Mayfield suggested that Reading Codes officials mirror Allentown Codes staff for a day to learn more about their operation. Ms. Kelleher suggested that the Reading team also attend one or two codes hearings at the Allentown MDJ level.

Mr. Khokhar and Ms. Mayfield also suggested holding a Codes Forum with other Third Class-sized cities. Mr. Weiss agreed that this type of forum would be beneficial to all who attend.

Mr. Olsen noted that in Allentown the Redevelopment Authority assists the BPRC with housing issues. He noted the need for the Reading BPRC to use a forceful and deliberate approach similar to that successfully used in Allentown. Mr. Olsen noted that the Reading BPRC was highly impressed with the aggressive process used in Allentown.

Mr. Bealer inquired about the Wall of Shame used in Allentown to highlight problem properties. Mr. Weiss stated that this is useful but noted the need for the creation of defined criteria and the need to carefully select problem properties.

Mr. Olsen asked Council President Spencer to comment. Council President Spencer stated that he and City Council are pleased with the progress made by the BPRC. He stated that this group is heading in the right direction.

Mr. Olsen suggested that follow-up meetings with Mr. Weiss and Mr. Kromer occur. Ms. Kelleher will add Mr. Weiss and Mr. Kromer onto the distribution list. He described the other partnerships the Reading BPRC has developed.

Habitat for Humanity

Ms. Kelleher stated that Mr. Worrell had confirmed attending the meeting. She stated that something must have come up at the last minute. Mr. Olsen asked Ms. Kelleher to contact Mr. Worrell about attending the November meeting.

Updates

Properties Under BPRC Order

Mr. Khokhar reported that an update will be provided at the November meeting. Mr. Olsen asked Mr. Khokhar to refine the list in the target neighborhood to include only the 12-16 of the worst properties. Ms. Kelleher stated that the owner of the Knoblauch property in the 500 block of Penn Street is resisting an interior codes inspection. She reported on her conversation with Historic Preservation Specialist Amy Johnson about the need to use the Demolition by Neglect provision in the Historic Preservation Ordinance as this property is a contributing property in the Callowhill Historic District. Ms Johnson will report back after conversing with Mr. LeFevre from the PHMC. Mr. Weiss noted the need for quick action to make the necessary roof repairs.

CDBG Funding

Ms. Kelleher reported that the Administration will not amend the 2009 CDBG budget to include an allocation for the BPRC; however, they have promised to provide funding through a CDBG amendment when funding is needed. Ms. Kelleher also reported that she has attempted to contact Mr. Bednar, director of the Southeast DCED office, to discuss grant opportunities.

Mr. Olsen suggested forming subcommittees to undertake some of this additional work. He offered to lead the grants subcommittee. Ms. Kelleher suggested adding a Codes subcommittee that can interact and obtain updates on the target properties. Mr. Olsen asked Mr. Bealer to lead this subcommittee. Mr. Bealer agreed.

Other Business

Mr. Bealer provided a condition report on the properties in the target area obtained by a walk around. He also described his discussions with Mr. Mukerji about the BPRC process.

Mr. Bealer suggested that the City rezone the target area in the 6th Ward from R-3 to Commercial Neighborhood, which will encourage the redevelopment to support this area. The group next discussed the Buttonwood Gateway area. Ms. Kelleher displayed the maps of the area prepared in the late 1990s. The area has been expanded up to Schuylkill Avenue. Ms. Kelleher suggested that Mr. Bealer discuss this suggestion with the Zoning Committee, formed to assist with the rewrite of the City's zoning ordinance.

No further business was brought forward. Mr. Candelario moved, seconded by Mr. Bealer, to adjourn the meeting. The next BPRC meeting will occur on Tuesday, November 18th at 6 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by Linda A. Kelleher, City Clerk

Follow-up issues

- Update on the inclusion of ADD, community gardens, OCR rehabbed properties, parking lots and demolished properties in the program provided by Great Valley - Mr. Bealer
- Update on Grant availability - Mr. Olsen & Ms. Kelleher
- Meeting with President of HBA - Mr. Khokhar
- Codes Forum - Ms. Mayfield
- Codes visit to Allentown Codes Department - Ms. Mayfield & Mr. Khokhar
- Updates on properties on the target list, as amended - Mr. Khokhar and Mr. Bealer