

Blighted Property Review Committee
Tuesday, August 5, 2008
Minutes

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

Staff Attending: J. Khokhar, L. Kelleher, J. Conway, A. Miller, M. Mayfield

Others Attending: Representatives from the North Washington Community Group, R. Miller, Exec Dir of NHS

Mr. Olsen called the meeting to order at 6:05 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 May meeting and the agenda for this meeting.

The committee discussed if the list of properties identified and forwarded to Codes was correct. Mr. Bealer stated that he recalled that two properties should not be included. Ms. Kelleher stated that her notes reflect that the properties in question were indeed included. After a brief discussion, the group decided to leave the list stand as presented.

Mr. Candelario moved, seconded by Mr. Bealer, to approve the minutes from the May meeting as presented and the agenda as presented.

Allentown Forum

Mr. Olsen called the groups attention to the Allentown power point presentation attached to the agenda.

Mr. Olsen described the criteria and "no nonsense" process used by Allentown. When a property is listed for taking by Allentown, their BPRC does not permit the property owner to intervene once the process has started. If the property is

rehabilitated before the process concludes, the property is removed from the list. However, if the rehabilitation is not completed the “taking” process continues. He suggested that the Reading BPRC adopt the same practice, as it is very efficient.

Mr. A. Miller agreed and added that the Allentown approach is very consistent.

Mr. Olsen explained that after properties are taken, they are owned by the Allentown Redevelopment Authority.

Mr. Bealer and Mr. A. Miller noted the important role Allentown's Pre-Settlement Review Inspection and the regular rental inspections play in the proper maintenance of properties. Ms. Kelleher explained that due to a lawsuit, Reading's Pre-Settlement Inspection Ordinance was repealed and recently replaced by the Post-Settlement Review Process. Implementation of the Post-Settlement Review Inspection is expected at the beginning of July.

Mr. Olsen noted the absence of the other documents offered by the Allentown group. Mr. A. Miller was asked to supply copies to Ms. Kelleher.

CHDO Allocation

Mr. R. Miller, Executive Director of Neighborhood Housing Services (NHS) stated that the NHS has been the City's CHDO for approximately three years. He distributed information packets about the NHS operation. He explained that the NHS offers three program areas focused on revitalization, home ownership and community assistance.

Mr. R. Miller explained the important role Operation Facelift plays in the revitalization of neighborhoods. He also explained the rehab and repair assistance program. He noted that the defunct PRIDE program provided approximately \$25,000 to property owners in the form of grants, if the property owner resided in the property for a defined period of time. He explained that there is now a rehab and repair assistance program for owner occupied properties. Ms. Kelleher noted that this information was included on the list of assistance programs provided at the May meeting.

In response to a question, Mr. R. Miller explained that acquisition to rehabilitation can take up to 3 years. He noted the difficulties associated with rehabilitation due to lead paint regulations.

Mr. Bealer recalled Allentown's use of CHDO funds. Mr. R. Miller stated that in the past the CHDO allocation ranged from \$250,000 to a \$1,000,000 but the amount was decreased due to the Our City Reading project. He added that only \$175,000 was allocated last year. Mr. R. Miller noted that the NHS can obtain funding from other resources that are not available to the City. However, he stressed that management of CHDO requires funding for staff, adding that an increase of \$50,000 would provide the staff necessary to improve the results. He reported that the City stopped providing operational funding beginning in the 2005 budget year. He stated that only 66 homes were assisted last year due to the decreased allocation.

Mr. Bealer explained that the BPRC's initiative will be covered in the updated Consolidated Plan currently being drafted. He questioned if the NHS can assist in organizing a Community Development Corporation (CDC). Mr. R. Miller replied that the NHS already operates CDCs. He suggested that the best CDCs grow up from a grass roots effort.

Ms. Mayfield inquired if the Allentown property inspections include owner-occupied properties. Mr. Bealer responded affirmatively and added that on the occasion that the property owner does not allow an interior inspection, codes inspectors focus on exterior conditions.

Mr. R Miller reported on the success of the Homestead program used in 1978. Under the Homestead program, properties requiring rehabilitation could be purchased from the City for \$1 with the agreement that the property would be restored within an 18 month period. If the rehabilitation was not completed within the required period, the property reverted back to the City.

Mr. Olsen asked Ms. Kelleher to invite representatives from Our City Reading (OCR) to the August meeting so the committee can begin to understand the program offered. He suggested that the use of both programs along with the BPRC process could be an effective combination.

Mr. R. Miller explained that tax credits are available to financial institutions who participate in projects to revitalize the local community. He described the existence of the Community Reinvestment Act (passed by Congress in 1977) which requires financial institutions to participate and contribute in the areas where they are located.

Urban Gardens

Neal Brantley, representing the Reading Environmental Advisory Committee (EAC) and the Berks County Conservancy, distributed information on the Conservancy's urban garden project and information on the greening project used in Philadelphia. This project beautifies vacant properties with green improvements, transforming them from an eyesore to pleasant vistas in neighborhoods. Mr. Olsen stated that information will be used in the BPRC's arsenal as the group considers their strategic plan and its global approach.

Updates

Properties Under BPRC Order

Mr. Khokhar reported that letters requesting interior inspections of the properties ordered by the BPRC have been sent. An update will be provided at the August meeting.

GIS

Mr. Bealer displayed the maps showing each property identified by the Great Valley study. The map uses color coding to show how each property was designated by the study. Mr. Bealer also provided break-outs of 13 areas on smaller enlargements. He added that the electronic data also permitted the preparation of a list showing landlords owning multiple blighted properties and the properties sorted by address. Mr. Bealer noted that he discovered some properties identified as vacant but approved for Homestead. He will provide this list to the group later. He reported that he will continue to work to include the ADD properties.

Blighted Property Revitalization & Reclamation Act

Ms. Mayfield reported that she has started to review the legislation and will have a brief prepared for the August meeting. She also reported that both the Federal and State bills are in committee. She stated that she attended a meeting this week with the Mayor and Barry Miller, from the Zoning Board, where the group discussed various methods of addressing vacant properties.

BPRC Responsibilities

Mr. Bealer asked Ms. Mayfield to review the process, letters and timelines provided by Allentown to determine if the BPRC enabling legislation requires any amendment before this process is utilized.

Mr. Olsen stated that the education obtained at the meetings with the Harrisburg

and Allentown committees answered the of the questions the Reading BPRC.

New Business

Mr. Candelario urged the group to schedule a meeting to begin discussing the strategic plan. Mr. Olsen agreed, noting the need to, at a minimum, start these discussions as the BPRC is scheduled to meet with City Council at their August 4th Finance Meeting. At this meeting the BPRC plans to ask Council to consider allocating CDBG funds to aid this effort.

Mr. Olsen asked the group to send Ms. Kelleher the dates they are available in July. Ms. Kelleher will then determine which date will suit the group best.

Other Business

No issues were raised.

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, August 5th.

Respectfully submitted by Linda A. Kelleher, City Clerk

Recap of 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
- Review & Brief on Federal Blighted Property Revitalization and Reclamation Act and legislation proposed by Senator Rhodes - Ms. Mayfield
- Letter requesting amendment to Federal and State legislation - Ms. Kelleher
- List of BPRC "Do's and Don'ts" - Ms. Mayfield
- Meeting with President of HBA - Mr. Khokhar
- Updates on properties ordered for inspection