

BLIGHTED PROPERTY REVIEW COMMITTEE

THUESDAY, MARCH 17, 2011

BRPC Members Attending: L. Olsen, Chair; D. Reed, M. Wolfe, A. Grant, W. Bealer, M. Candelario, D. Luckey

Others attending: S. Haver, L. Kelleher, T. Butler

Mr. Olsen, Chair, called the meeting to order at 6:05 p.m. and announced that a quorum was present.

Public Comment

Mr. Olsen opened the floor for public comment. As no one stepped forward to speak, the comment period was closed.

Agenda

Mr. Olsen called the BPRC's attention to the agenda for this meeting.

Mr. Luckey moved, seconded by Mr. Grant, to approve the agenda. The motion was approved unanimously.

Hearing Process and Property Selection Review

Mr. Olsen stated the revised hearing process is working beautifully and does not require further adjustment at this time. He congratulated BPRC staff for their work to refine the process.

Ms. Kelleher explained that properties are moved onto the BPRC list through broad input from various City Departments and complaints from property owners, after which the property conditions (water service, tax delinquency and codes violations) are checked. Properties that meet the blighted criteria then receive pre-eminent strike letters. She stated that many properties move into compliance after they receive the pre-eminent strike letters. Properties that do not comply are cycled through the hearing process. Mr. Haver stated that staff is currently researching properties on the Fire

Department's "Do Not Enter" list, the list of properties without water service and tax delinquent, etc.

Ms. Kelleher suggested reviewing properties in the Buttonwood Gateway area. She stated that this has been a redevelopment area for over 10 years. The City Redevelopment Authority (RRA) is the largest property owner. The County CD Department and Our City Reading have been acquiring properties and demolishing them. This area is to become a new residential area for single family and duplex homes. She suggested focusing on the rental properties.

Mr. Luckey expressed his belief that the BPRC should remain focused on Ricktown. Mr. Haver stated that there are only a few remaining properties in Ricktown that meet the blighted criteria.

Ms. Reed noted the deteriorated condition of the remaining properties in the Buttonwood Gateway area and described how this area intersects with the Ricktown area. She suggested beginning to process properties to further the redevelopment plan for this area. Ms. Kelleher agreed noting that processing these properties may make owners more willing to relinquish ownership.

The BPRC discussed the Ricktown issue further and decided to have Mr. Haver and Mr. Reinhart take one more look at Ricktown to discover any remaining properties that meet the blighted criteria and to begin sending pre- eminent strike letters to those properties in the Buttonwood Gateway area.

Eminent Domain Update

Mr. Luckey stated that staff is currently rectifying some legal issues surrounding the Planning Commission's reuse recommendations. Mr. Haver stated that at a meeting last week this issue was discussed and staff found that the current ordinance contains a double step for the Planning Commission that is unnecessary. He suggested eliminating this double step when amending the ordinance to pull in components authorized by the State Legislature in 2008 and Act 90, which is effective April 27th.

Mr. Luckey described the RRA's marketing plans for properties certified as blighted. He stated that the RRA would like to identify a future owner and project before undertaking eminent domain to lessen the burden of providing maintenance to the

properties acquired. He stated that approximately six (6) properties are scheduled to begin the eminent domain process.

Review Target List for April and May Determination Hearings

Mr. Haver distributed a list of properties to enter the hearing phase in April and May. He stated that the properties on the April list are the last of the properties that were on the original target list.

Ms. Kelleher stated that the notification to the property owners along with posting notices and affidavits were sent out this past week.

Review Act 90

The BPRC reviewed the summary provided through the Housing Alliance regarding Act 90 (Senate Bill 900), which broadens a municipalities ability to go after blighted properties before they enter the blighted property hearing process.

Ms. Kelleher stated that the summary shows the many areas of legislation that will require amendment.

Mr. Haver stated that the Mayor invited Jeri Stumpf, who was the author of the legislation, to come to Reading to meet with various parties on March 29th.

Improvement of Rehab Plan Process

Mr. Haver stated that the current Rehab Plan process is too loose and suggested amending the agreement to provide strong refinement and “teeth”. He suggested adopting the Harrisburg model, which requires a deposit and sets timelines for rehabilitation. He also suggested requiring the property owner to relinquish the property to the City if he fails to comply with the rehab plan. He stated that if the property owner complies the deposit will be refunded to the property owner. He stated that this process would be monitored by the Chief Building Inspector, who should begin working for the City by the end of March.

Ms. Kelleher suggested drafting the ordinance now so it will be in place shortly after the building inspector comes on board.

Other Business

Mr. Grant noted the problems associated with the number of properties being transferred through the foreclosure process.

Ms. Kelleher stated that she and the Deputy City Clerk have been meeting with Mr. Weiss, the City's Housing Consultant and the Interim Codes Administrator about various housing problems. She stated that after months of meetings they noted the need to gain some control over properties that transfer. She stated that the group met with the Reading Berks Association of Realtors and the Recorder of Deeds to discuss this problem. They decided to use an approach used in Norristown that requires a Certificate of Transfer when the deed is recorded. She explained that to obtain a Certificate of Transfer the property must submit to a health and safety pre-settlement inspection (including a zoning review and business license for business properties) and certifications of water and solid waste. If a Certificate of Transfer does not accompany a deed, the County Recorder will flag the property and notify the City.

Mr. Haver stated that Habitat for Humanity will receive HOME funding for property rehabilitation. This funding will provide starter construction, up to stud work.

The BPRC next discussed the 600 block of North Front Street and suggested a Codes Sweep. Mr. Haver was asked to follow-up with Codes and Zoning.

Ms. Wolfe described the work at 620 North Front Street. She asked Mr. Haver to find out if zoning has been issues for a multiple unit rental and if the property is in compliance with Codes and Trades regulations.

The BRPC discussed the vacant lots in the 600 block of McKnight Street, where two (2) warehouse structures were demolished after debilitating fires. Mr. Haver stated a developer was interested in putting a Dollar Store in this area.

Mr. Olsen stated that the next meeting is a Determination Hearing on Thursday, April 21st at 6 p.m. He asked the BPRC to meet in Ms. Kelleher's office at 5:45 pm before the start of the hearing.

Ms. Reed moved, seconded by Mr. Grant, to adjourn the meeting.

Respectfully submitted by Linda A. Kelleher CMC, City Clerk