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## **Blighted Property Review Committee**

**Thursday, January 15, 2015**

### **Update Meeting Report**

**BPRC Members Attending:** L. Olsen, Chair; M. Wolfe, W. Bealer, D. Reed, H. Urena

**Others attending:** L. Kelleher, T. Butler, J. Varghese, K. Potts

Mr. Olsen, Chair, called the meeting to order at 6:08 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.

#### **Approval of Agenda and Minutes**

Mr. Olsen called the BPRC's attention to the October Certification minutes that were distributed electronically and the agenda for this meeting.

**Ms. Reed moved, seconded by Ms. Wolfe, to approve the agenda and the minutes as distributed. The motion was approved unanimously.**

#### **Reorganization**

Mr. Olsen noted the need to elect officers at the beginning of each year, as per the bylaws. He stated that the committee currently has a chair and a vice-chair. He stated that he and Ms. Wolfe are willing to be re-elected to those positions. The committee members agreed and Mr. Olsen and Ms. Wolfe were re-elected by a unanimous vote.

Mr. Olsen stated that he also serves on the County Planning Commission and he was appointed by the Planning Commission to the County Blighted Property Review Committee as their representative. He stated that he recently provided the County with an overview of the blighted property process used by the City. He stated that the County committee will be modeling itself after the Cumberland County Blighted Property Committee. He stated that he also was recently appointed to the Habitat for Humanity Board.

## **Update Acquisition Handbook**

Mr. Varghese described his work to become educated on the seven (7) acquisition methods contained in the Acquisition Handbook. He stated that utilizing the methods is more difficult than he initially thought. He stated that he has found the means to implement the method for voluntary acquisition, when a property owner wants to shed a property. He stated that he has located developers who have the capacity to take and rehabilitate properties.

Mr. Varghese stated that he is currently working with a developer, who has legal and financial support, on a conservatorship property at 409 Elm Street. A second developer has started acquiring properties on Hudson Street to demolish and rebuild.

Mr. Varghese stated that the 2014 BPRC Report is almost completed. He distributed the first draft to the committee for review.

Mr. Olsen questioned if the Land Bank option will be implemented in Reading. Mr. Varghese stated that he agrees with the concept and that he was hopeful that Reading could use the proposed County Land Bank before it was voted down by the Commissioners. He stated that implementation of the Land Bank in Reading is a matter of finding the right time to consider the issue. He stated that he is encouraged by the implementation of the Land Bank process in other Pennsylvania communities.

Mr. Varghese stated that he has been working with the City's Housing Partners to discuss the bank REO (Real Estate Owned) properties that have gone through the foreclosure process. He stated that generally these properties are left in varying states of disrepair but come with some infusion of a cash contribution from the bank. The amounts are usually around \$10,000.

Ms. Kelleher suggested that the City accept the properties when developers have agreed to take title and then pass the properties from the bank to the City to the developer. Mr. Varghese stated that with a cash infusion developers may agree to take possession of some of these properties. Ms. Kelleher also suggested approaching the banks about conveying a few poorly repaired with one or two properties that are in reasonable condition.

## **Other Matters**

Mr. Bealer inquired about the demolition of 1237 Buttonwood Street. Ms. Butler stated that the demolition was challenged in court by the property owner. She stated that attorney Fred Lachat is handling the matter. She stated that when she received the last update, the parties were negotiating about the items to be removed from the property, the liability for entry to the property, etc. She stated that she will obtain an update from Mr. Lachat.

Ms. Reed inquired about 1502 Luzerne Street. She stated that this property was certified. She noted that this block of Luzerne Street is highly traveled as the street is an access point to the Route 12 Bypass. She stated that before the property was blighted it was a showplace and meticulously maintained. She inquired if the Conservatorship process could be used to assist this property. Mr. Varghese and Ms. Potts offered to follow up.

Mr. Bealer questioned 1538 Mineral Spring Road and other addresses in this neighborhood. Ms. Potts stated that she will follow up.

Ms. Potts stated that over the past two (2) cycles, more property owners are working to correct the property's problems to avoid becoming blighted. She reported that she recently did a vacant property sweep and identified approximately 1100 vacant properties within Reading. She also stated that she recently created a map showing all the certified properties. Mr. Varghese displayed the map on his lap top.

Ms. Butler stated that she was pleased and impressed with the developer the work group met with earlier today. The developer is interested in acquiring 409 Elm Street as a Conservancy property in partnership with the City's CDC.

Ms. Kelleher suggested tracking the number of properties that avoid the blighted property process by correcting deficiencies after receiving the pre-eminent strike letter and the determination notice.

Ms. Reed noted that the properties that were involved in the recent fire in the 700 block of Chestnut Street are certified properties. The group discussed the properties in this neighborhood.

Mr. Olsen thanked the blighted property staff for the work they do. He stated that the Determination Hearing is scheduled for Thursday, February 19<sup>th</sup> at 6 pm. He asked the committee to gather in Ms. Kelleher's office 15 minutes before the start of the hearing.

**Mr. Urena moved, seconded by Ms. Reed, to adjourn the meeting at approximately 6:55 pm.**

*Respectfully submitted by Linda A. Kelleher, Secretary*