



CITY COUNCIL

Nominations & Appointments Committee

**Monday, May 2, 2016
Meeting Report**

Attendance: S. Marmarou, J. Slifko, M. Goodman-Hinnershitz

Others Attending: S. Katzenmoyer

The meeting was called to order at 4:10 pm by Mr. Marmarou.

I. Interview

Lee Olsen (reappointment – Blighted Property Review Committee)

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz questioned how the Blighted Property Review Committee (BPRC) was functioning and to describe its successes. Mr. Olsen stated that the appointees have remained consistent but that the Council representatives have changed. He stated that the BPRC always has a quorum.

Mr. Olsen stated that the BPRC had been holding hearings on a monthly basis but that it was slowed down during the Spencer Administration. He stated that once a property gets on the BPRC's radar it is sent a letter warning them to get into compliance or the BPRC will certify it blighted and that they could lose the property. He stated that if the property is not improved, it enters the hearing process.

Mr. Olsen stated that taking a property by eminent domain is very difficult. He stated that due to changes in State law the BPRC now has more options. He stated that it is frustrating that the BPRC doesn't receive follow up information on the properties after they have been certified. He expressed the belief that the City doesn't take more properties because the City and the Redevelopment Authority do not have the funds to maintain them, rehab them and get them revitalized. He expressed the belief that the City should work with NHS, OCR and Habitat to revitalize them more quickly. He stated that the BPRC now conducts only two hearing cycles per year.

Mr. Olsen stated that in the past, Mr. Kromer noted his hope that the City issue a \$10 million bond to address blighted properties. He stated that he is committed to the process but that he often wonders when he will see improvement.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz invited Mr. Olsen to visit the revitalized homes in her block. She noted the need to ensure there is follow through.

Mr. Olsen stated that he has researched the amount of non-owner occupied properties in other PA cities. He stated that they average 26%. He stated that Reading averages 56% which is too high. He stated that most hearing agendas contain 15 – 18 properties but only 5 – 6 owners appear to testify. He stated that most times the owners argue that their property should not be blighted because they are only two years behind on taxes and utility payments instead of five years. He stated that staff now shows current photos of the properties as they are being addressed. He stated that these owners ignore their bills and their violation notices.

Mr. Slifko questioned if Mr. Olsen supported the land bank concept. Mr. Olsen stated that he does. He stated that this would give the City immediate control of properties.

Mr. Slifko requested clarity on the function of the land bank. Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz stated that Council has been given inconsistent information. Mr. Olsen stated that Philadelphia's land bank is the best example. He stated that property ownership is transferred to the land bank. He stated that they build an inventory for new, large development or rehabilitate individual properties. He stated that the properties need to be maintained until they are developed and he's unsure why Reading has not yet created a land bank. He suggested that the land bank would be governed by an independent board similar to the Water Authority.

Mr. Marmarou stated that a property in his block has been vacant for 10 years. He stated that the property is susceptible to vandalism and that this is an otherwise stable area. Mr. Olsen stated that if the taxes and utilities are being paid and the property is in stable condition it would not be addressed by the BPRC.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz suggested that the land bank issue be added to Council's Strategic Planning agenda. She stated that there are many loose ends with blighted properties and she would like an overview of the entire process. She expressed the belief that more and more properties are being abandoned by its owners and that it destroys neighborhoods.

Mr. Slifko agreed with the need to discuss this at Strategic Planning. He expressed the belief that the BPRC is doing everything it can and that there needs to be follow up.

Mr. Olsen stated that it was the Community Development Department Director that requested that the BPRC slow down. He claimed that staff could not keep up with the many properties and that the BPRC is only one link in the chain.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz noted the need to have all stakeholders come together. She stated that Council is being asked to consider an amendment to the CDBG budget that would divert City demolition funding.

Mr. Slifko noted the need to develop and use additional tools.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz suggested that some agenda topics can be removed as they are being pursued so that there is time for new topics.

Mr. Olsen requested action on the land bank issue. Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz stated that Council has not received an update since the administrative transition. She stated that it is time to revisit this issue.

Mr. Olsen stated that the City is full of row homes. He stated that some are good and some are not. He expressed the belief that if those that are not good are not addressed it will lead to spreading damage to those that are good. He stated that they also become health hazards.

The Nominations and Appointments Committee recommends the reappointment of Lee Olsen to the Blighted Property Review Committee.

Mr. Olsen stated that he wished the work of the BPRC could be more effective. He noted his support of Mr. Kromer's plan for a bond issue to address blighted properties. He expressed the belief that the Redevelopment Authority also needs funds and personnel to address blighted properties.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz expressed the belief that this fits the Mayor's platform of addressing neighborhoods.

Mr. Slifko expressed the belief that revitalized properties pay for themselves quickly. He stated that the City should look at this as an investment in itself.

Mr. Olsen stated that a meeting will be held tomorrow to look at the Pagoda and the mountain as a whole to make it sustainable. He stated that two grants have been received and that there are many stakeholders.

Mr. Marmarou stated that these properties should not be turned over to anyone, including the County. Mr. Olsen stated that nothing would be sold or turned over.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz stated that there is good energy with this project. She noted that the use of the mountain has increased and that there must be a plan before this asset is damaged.

Mr. Olsen noted his hope that the Pagoda be open more often.

Ms. Goodman-Hinnershitz stated that she will be giving Council an update on this initiative at today's Strategic Planning Committee meeting.

The Nominations and Appointments Committee adjourned at 4:40 pm.

Respectfully Submitted by,
Shelly Katzenmoyer, CMC
Deputy City Clerk