

Atlantic City fighting blight one building at a time

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ATLANTIC CITY — Pastor Raymond Hollis Jr. and his wife, Shonda, inherited the blighted property on North Connecticut Avenue after his father passed away in 2011.

Severely damaged by Hurricane Sandy in 2012, the corner lot in Bungalow Park fell into a state of disrepair that Hollis was unaware of while living in North Carolina.

Notices of code violations and requirements to abate issued by the city went unanswered because the mail was being delivered to the vacant property, rather than the owners themselves.

On Monday morning, Hollis and his wife appeared before a hearing board consisting of code enforcement, construction and inspection officials to determine the fate of the property.

The city periodically holds such hearings to allow property owners a chance to make necessary arrangements to fix, or demolish, the building.

The Hollises were one of two property owners — a third was contacted via phone due to the owner's poor health — who sat down with the board after being issued notices last month to either present the city with a plan to fix their buildings or have the structures subject to demolition.

According to public notices, 11 property owners were asked to appear or present their plans to the board. Eight of the properties were discussed Monday.

Atlantic City code enforcement officials have identified the Hollises' property at 302 N. Connecticut Ave. as one in need of rehabilitation or demolition and are moving forward with plans to address the vacant property.

It is one of nearly 500 properties in the city that officials have included on a constantly-evolving list of abandoned or vacant structures that need attention.

For city officials, the process is a delicate balance of respecting the rights of property owners, while also doing what is in the resort's best interest. The hearings are essentially a negotiation and the conclusions are nonbinding, but the process allows for communication between the parties, which city officials say is all too often lacking when it comes to vacant and neglected properties.

Dale Finch, director of the city's licensing and inspection department, said there is a "drastic need" to address the problem.

"We are being very aggressive with the blight issue in the city," Finch told the Hollises on Monday morning. "There are several properties in this area that we are focusing on."

The Hollises told the board they had been seeking funds to demolish the former church, which used to house the Friendship Outreach Deliverance Ministries, but have not yet been able to do so. The pastor recognized that the building was past the point of salvaging.

“If we had the funding, it would be done today,” said Hollis.

Ultimately, the board decided to move forward with the demolition process. The city will publish a notice to solicit bids from contractors, award a contract to the low bidder, pay the demolition costs upfront and then place a lien on the property to recoup the costs.

That process was recommended for five others — 623 Caspian Ave., 1228 N. Ohio Ave., 1407 N. Ohio Ave., 1517 Penrose Ave. and 1538 Penrose Ave. — whose owners or agents were not present.

Clinton Walden, a code enforcement inspector, detailed some of the issues the abandoned properties pose for public safety and health officials. In addition to being eyesores, the vacant properties attract vagrants who seek shelter and, sometimes, a place to engage in criminal activity.

Oftentimes, Walden noted, the city will board the properties up only to have the same people forcibly enter, creating a cat-and-mouse game between code enforcement and the squatters.

“Every vacant property has that potential, especially in the winter time,” Walden said.

Not all the properties on the city’s list will be demolished.

Ernest Misters and his nephew, Garry Rogers, appeared before the board Monday after receiving a notice for the property at 1922 Grant Ave. The home was badly damaged by fire in April and has been unoccupied since. Even after being boarded up, the property has been broken into three separate times by vagrants.

Misters, 81, presented the board with a quote from a contractor who was going to completely gut the inside of the home so it could be rebuilt. The plan is to have the work finished by mid-July.

“My intention is to rehab (the building),” he told the hearing board. “We want the same thing you do.”