

**HEALTH, HUMAN SERVICES AND HOUSING
OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE**

March 18, 2008

4:05 P.M.

Councilwoman Robinson, Chairman, called the meeting of the Health, Human Services and Housing Opportunities Committee to order with Councilmen Rico, Benson, Berz, Bennett, Page, Pierce, Gaines and Franklin present. City Attorney Randall Nelson and Shirley Crowover, Assistant Clerk to the Council, were also present.

Others present included Betty Lynn Smith, Sandra Gober, Richard Beeland, Beverly Johnson, Dan Johnson, and Mayor Littlefield.

Chairman Robinson called the meeting to order, stating that we would hear a report from Beverly Johnson and her resources. She turned the meeting over to Ms. Johnson.

Ms. Johnson noted that we had just sat through a long Public Works Committee meeting; that they had a short power point presentation that could be shown or we could just go through the report on "Housing Condition and Vacant Property Survey and Revitalization Strategies". She noted that they had asked the Council's approval to enter into a contract with J-Quad to do a housing study; that they studied vacant lots and structures in collaboration with Community Impact. She noted that we had with us tonight Betty Lynn Smith and John Bridger; also Sandra Gober, who manages the Community Development Fund. She noted that 18 neighborhoods were involved in this Study and that **James Gilliam, Jr.** of J-Quad Planning Group was present to make this presentation; that it would be presented in summary form, and she turned the meeting over to Mr. Gilliam.

Mr. Gilliam reiterated that 18 neighborhoods were involved, with Community Impact being involved in 7 of the communities. He stated that he would just give an overview—that they rated new units and also dilapidated ones, and this would be documented. He mentioned taking photographs of vacant lots and their recommendations. He noted that their methodology included code issues—that existing properties were determined to be either vacant or occupied; that some were in standard condition; some in need of minor repairs such as aesthetics; some needed major repairs such as roofs and foundations; and some were dilapidated and no longer fit for human habitation. He went on to say that they created a digital map for each of the 18 neighborhoods and each have a constant. They went on to see if they met the building code, were of occupancy status, and if there were code violations. They found that vacant lots are 15.5% of total parcels and vacant buildings are 7.9% of total parcels. 68.6% of the total residential buildings surveyed are in need of minor or major repairs or are dilapidated; that 53.5% of the buildings surveyed were in need of minor repairs, and the trend can be reversed.

Mr. Gilliam stated that in platting issues, regulatory controls and nonresidential use encroachment on residential uses are creating instability. Lower cost housing alternatives are limited to mobile homes. New homes are being built in neighborhoods but vacancy rates and the length of time required for sales indicate a sluggish market and/or a need for greater incentives to boost sales in the target neighborhoods. Many, however are sitting vacant, and it could get worse. He noted that the City can't solve these problems alone, and we need increased participation from community, private sector, and the faith-based community.

He next went over five basic recommendations for intervention—(1) Increase Volunteer Housing Assistance Programs; (2) Design and implement a Land Acquisition and Land Bank Program; (3) Increase resources available for Housing Programs; (4) Implement Zoning and Regulatory changes; and (5) Design and implement alternative housing products and development approaches. He explained that the City could be matched with volunteer teams to repair structures, mentioning what had been done in other cities such as Dallas, Texas. He mentioned getting donations from Building Suppliers, reiterating that faith-based organizations needed to get involved. He mentioned developing a method to implement a Land Acquisition and Land Bank Program to get property back on the tax rolls; this deals with establishing ways to take control with a Land Transfer Program.

Mr. Gilliam next talked about increasing resources available for housing programs. He mentioned applying for Brownfield Economic Development Initiative Grants and programs to remediate asbestos.

He talked about implementing zoning and regulatory changes, talking about a Conservation District, citing Orchard Knob and the good things going on there. He was in favor of a Conservation District over a Historic District, thinking that a Historic District might be a deterrent—that a Conservation District protects features without regulating such things as the color of paint, etc. He went on to say that we need to design and implement Proactive approaches to Code enforcement, noting that chronic and repeat violators of the City's building/premise codes regulations account for much of the inspection work load. He suggested dealing with repeat violators differently with a citation as the first attention-getter and the same thing for chronic violators.

Mr. Gilliam talked about a Residential Rental Property Registration Program. He stated that this legislation had been passed in Tennessee; that all rental property could be required to register with the City; that if they are not in compliance when they are inspected, then they have to wait until they are in compliance.

Councilman Pierce stated that he had long wanted something like Rental Property Registration, and he asked the City Attorney to start on this right away.

Mr. Gilliam explained that those in compliance get a four-year waiver.

The fifth recommendation was to design and implement alternative housing products and development approaches. He mentioned such things as a Community Garden, which is an interesting way to use a vacant lot.

Mr. Gilliam noted that of the prevailing things is difficulty in qualifying for mortgages, mentioning Lease-Purchase programs—that there could be a three-year lease to give a family the time to work through financial issues; that if you don't comply in three years to purchase, you lose this option. He mentioned developments in the range of \$120,000 to \$130,000.

He went on to talk about alternative products for the elderly; that sometimes the elderly have large homes, and they can't continue to afford the maintenance and upkeep. He talked of allowing smaller clusters of cottages where the homeowner would own their unit and pay a small maintenance fee; that the elderly could be encouraged to sell their existing homes and purchase cottages. He stated that before this could be done, we would have to do market research to see if people in Chattanooga would participate in such a program; that often they want to relocate in the neighborhood they are familiar with and want it to be close to churches, bus stops and meals-on-wheels.

Mr. Gilliam explained that modular houses are **not** mobile homes, mentioning how well these were done in Louisiana with porches in minority neighborhoods. He noted that modular houses could be built faster and at a lower cost; that the units could be assembled on site within 120 days at 30% less cost. He noted that it was hard to keep a person qualified. He talked about shared housing in Vermont where a single mother and child would be paired with someone who was elderly; that the younger mother could help the elderly person and the elderly person could provide child care—that they both could meet each others' needs.

He stated that he was speed-reading this report—that the implementation of the revitalization was divided into three categories—Short-Term; Mid-Term; and Long-Term.

Mr. Gilliam stated that they captured the data of building conditions by using digital photography and had created a Geographic Information System (GIS)—that they combined different layers.

Councilwoman Berz expressed that she thought this was fabulous and a wonderful job, and this could be taken to communities. She added that when talking about multiple fines, that we could only fine \$50.00, and this had not been successful; that with multiple fines, the impact would be greater.

Mr. Gilliam stated that Councilwoman Berz was exactly right; that when a property owner goes before a Judge, we need to levy a fine that is worthwhile.

Councilwoman Berz stated that we were stuck with a \$50.00 fine. She went on to say that she liked the idea of a Conservation District, which she thought was one step below a Historic District—that people will fight about the color of paint. She related to Ms. Johnson that she had done “good”.

Chairman Robinson stated that she was excited, too; that this was information that the City could use, along with CNE and Community Impact; that she thought J-Quad had done something like an MRI, showing what is vacant and what is in violation; that this really brings these 18 neighborhoods into clear view, and we should be able to do a whole lot better job.

Ms. Johnson stated that it would help them in knowing what it is appropriate for the City to do.

Chairman Robinson stated that this comes at a great time; that there is a record number of homeless; that we need to figure out a way to keep people in houses and help them buy property; that we can get people into housing that they can later buy with the Lease-Purchase Program. She stated that this was really exciting and that she commended Beverly Johnson and her team. She stated that the Council needed to make sure that this information stays on the top of their desks in helping us understand our neighborhoods.

Councilwoman Berz asked if this could be applied to other neighborhoods in the City?

Ms. Johnson explained that they focus on those neighborhoods that are eligible for Community Block Grants.

Councilwoman Berz stated that this was a tool itself—that it was a fabulous template.

Councilman Benson mentioned prevention to not get to this point.

Ms. Johnson noted that we had talked about being pro-active; seeing those that were on the “edge” and identifying them; that it could be low cost maintenance now; that we do have families that have lost jobs and because of economics can’t afford maintenance; that we need to find a method to help, stating that she liked the idea of creating a Compliance Store Program.

Mr. Gilliam stated that another alternative was a Re-Store.

Chairman Robinson stated that if she was 25 years old, she would make this into a job and go to work on it.

Councilwoman Berz again expressed that this was exciting stuff.

Chairman Robinson stated that Mr. Gilliam was here from Texas, and we needed to utilize his talents while he was here.

Councilwoman Berz inquired if we wanted full implementation of this presentation would there have to be any Ordinance or Code changes?

Ms. Johnson responded that we need to “bite” off what we can do quickly; that there may have to be some legislative changes, and we will have to work with the City Attorney on this.

Councilwoman Berz indicated that she would like to get started in a week!

The meeting adjourned at 4:40 P.M.