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Thursday, February 19, 2004

City considers fix-up strategy

Old buildings get new life

By Gregory Korte
 The Cincinnati Enquirer

When the elderly owner of a former Colerain Avenue deli couldn't afford to maintain the dilapidated, century-old building, the Camp Washington Community Board filed a lawsuit under the state's receivership law.

The rarely used legal maneuver gave the owner an ultimatum: Fix up the property, or we'll ask a judge to let us do it for you.

The owner relented and gave away the corner store, and that's how architect Rebecca Bredwell ended up with the pie-shaped building for \$1. But she also had to agree to put \$40,000 worth of her own "blood, sweat and tears" into internal renovations.

City officials Wednesday unveiled a plan to encourage all 52 neighborhoods to use similar lawsuits to fix up blighted and abandoned buildings.

There are more than 1,400 abandoned residential buildings in the city that have either been condemned or are subject to "keep vacant" orders, according to the Cincinnati Department of Buildings and Inspections.

The owners "have just walked away," said Buildings and Inspections Director William V. Langevin. And they're often havens for criminal activity.

Though they're not the only buildings eligible for receivership, they represent the worst of the city's aging housing stock.

For a decade, Camp Washington has quietly used the law to fix up more than a dozen buildings.

The neighborhood raises more than \$500,000 a year - half of it from bingo games - to pay for the legal fees and repairs,



Rebecca Bredwell bought her property for \$1 and spent another \$40,000 of her own money and \$65,000 from Camp Washington to restore it. The lower level houses her offices. The second and third floors provide living space.
 The Cincinnati Enquirer/GARY LANDERS

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according to the organization's tax returns.

"We don't really bang our drum," said President Paul Rudemiller. "We're a well-kept secret and we want to keep it that way."

Cincinnati City Hall has watched the Camp Washington revitalization experiment with some interest - but until now has been slow to embrace the concept.

"If Camp Washington can do this by raising money from bingo games, we as a city need to figure out how to make it work," said Councilman David Pepper. He introduced a council motion in 2002 asking the city manager to put together a citywide program.

This week, city officials will finally roll out that program. With an initial budget of \$500,000 in federal grants, it will give neighborhood groups up to \$50,000 to take over and fix blighted properties through receivership lawsuits.

"We're looking at projects that come up through the neighborhood," said Deborah Holston, assistant city manager for community development. "Buildings that - except for that property - the neighborhood, the street, the block are all healthy and moving in the right direction."

The city's plan is this:

- Nonprofit community groups, financial institutions and qualified property managers would get city support to take over buildings through receivership.
- The city would reimburse the receiver up to \$2,500 for legal fees, and \$3,500 for project management.
- Receivers could get 75 percent of the renovation costs - up to \$50,000 - from the city.

Rudemiller said he's not sure Camp Washington will use the city's program, depending on the strings attached. Receivership hasn't worked elsewhere.

In 1998, the city started a one-year pilot project with the Abandoned Buildings Corp. to renovate 10 buildings through receivership in Over-the-Rhine. By 2001, after extending the deadline twice, ABC had completed two buildings.

ABC notes that it filed 29 receivership lawsuits - most of which led building owners to take action on their own. But the goal of fixing up 10 buildings was "totally unrealistic," the company said in a 2001 report to the city.

"We went slower than the city wanted," said John W. Hauck, a lawyer for the nonprofit Abandoned Buildings Corp. "It wasn't organized and promoted properly."

A city report said Abandoned Buildings stumbled from its very first project - a building at 1725 Elm St. that was "a very enormous structure with severe structural deficiencies." The company did work on the building, but never took control of it. (The building is now owned by David and Brenda Scheer, the

husband-and-wife architects who defaulted on a city contract to fix up eight buildings around Findlay Market.)

"ABC went plunging into Over-the-Rhine, and picked the worst buildings, surrounded by other bad buildings," said Pepper. "They approached it more from a historic conservation standpoint, and that wasn't the way to go."

The lesson learned by the city, according to a 2000 report from then-Neighborhood Services Director Francis X. Wagner, was that receivership is a "cumbersome and slow process."

Rudemiller doesn't disagree, but says the results are worth the effort.

Work on the former Colerain Avenue deli that's now architect Bredwell's home and the offices of her Design Resource Center was completed two years ago. Since then, others have bought two nearby buildings - one through receivership and another by a straight sale - and are in renovations.

"That's a prominent corner," Rudemiller said. "It's the first in a row of 100-year-old historical buildings. It was built for that corner. You have to make a statement for your neighborhood. Sometimes doing a building like that is worth all the money in the world."

Receivership holds property owners accountable and empowers neighborhoods, Pepper said.

"We need to change the incentive system. There are too many people out there waiting for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, hoping someone will come and buy them out at a huge profit if the neighborhood comes around," Pepper said. "You can't just thumb your nose at a fine any more."

Rudemiller said he's just as happy when the property owner fights off the receivership action by making the repairs himself.

"The primary goal of receivership is not to end up owning the thing. That could be an outcome. The goal is get property in bad hands into good hands and make it better," he said. "Building orders won't always do that."

Camp Washington's not in it for the money. Even when the group gets a building for free, the costs - of paying off old tax liens, of abating environmental hazards and of stabilizing buildings - are considerable.

"We lose money on every building we do," Rudemiller said. "So why do we do it? We're a nonprofit whose mission is to improve and upgrade the quality of the neighborhood."

"It's a great commute. I love it, especially when it's snowing," Bredwell said. The neighborhood hasn't turned the corner yet, she said. But she's fallen in love with the area.

Reporter Ken Alltucker contributed. E-mail gkorte@enquirer.com

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