

City stepping up its fight to curb blight

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Under a crush of complaints about shabby housing, junk cars and tall weeds, Columbus City Council is planning to add money for up to three new code-enforcement officers to the 2006 budget.

While Columbus continues to grow and age, the city has lost 24 code enforcers since 2001, going from 99 to 75, according to a report prepared for City Council. That loss includes nine full-time code-enforcement officers who were not replaced when they quit or retired, and 15 seasonal employees who cut tall grass and boarded up vacant houses.

Residents have noticed. City Councilman Kevin Boyce said they consistently asked for more-aggressive code enforcement while he was on the campaign trail last year.

"It demonstrates we've got to be addressing the need out there," Boyce said.

Karen Cassidy, president of the Hungarian Village Society, said her South Side neighborhood is trying to turn itself around. But that's hard to do when crime and rotting houses go hand in hand.

"Drug dealers and criminals are living in the same properties with code violations," she said.

Cassidy said she likes the code officer assigned to her area. He works hard.

"But there's not enough of him to go around," Cassidy said.

Boyce said more enforcement officers are a start. They could cost the city between \$175,000 and \$200,000 a year total. But with limited resources, city officials must think creatively to boost code enforcement.

To that end, the city has talked with the nonprofit Community Crime Patrol about a pilot program in Franklinton. Trained patrol officers could assist city code officials by making sure property owners are fixing problems.

In general, code enforcement in Columbus is driven by complaints.

"It's all we can do," said city code-enforcement supervisor Jeff Pharion.

On the city's Northeast Side, Pharion and the two code officers he supervises are busy. They cover a huge area from south of Morse Road, north to I-270 and across northeast Columbus to the growing areas around New Albany.

The area is filled with houses and apartments built in the 1960s and 1970s.

Pharion sees a lot of junk cars. At one house on Glendon Road last week, he checked out an old red Dodge with expired tags and three flat tires. He also noticed mildewed, waterdamaged soffits and a dangling gutter at the house.

At a house on Tamarack Boulevard, he cited two apparently inoperable vans, both with expired tags. One had two flat tires and straddled the sidewalk.

Asked if he wants more inspectors, code-enforcement supervisor Dana Rose said, "If we had five more, that would be good."

According to a recent report that a legislative aide prepared for the Columbus City Council, the number of full-time code-enforcement officers dropped from 68 in 2001 to 59 last year.

And while Columbus Mayor Michael B. Coleman touts the success of his Neighborhood Pride program, which includes added code enforcement, the December report said the Pride sweeps don't leave lasting improvements.

In the program, city crews spend a week in one neighborhood cleaning trash from alleys, cutting grass in parks, painting fire hydrants, repairing street lights and inspecting home exteriors for code violations.

"This 'systematic code enforcement' approach has worked in some areas, but has only been effective for a short amount of time," the report said.

But Coleman called his Pride program "very successful." Since the program began six years ago, 5,300 properties have been brought into compliance and 400 junk cars have been removed, he said.

The city doesn't have the money for a constant, systematic approach, Coleman said.

Coleman's spokesman, Mike Brown, said the city has contracted with neighborhood groups to cut grass as the seasonal employees had done.

As for the three new codeenforcement officers, Coleman said, "I will gladly and willingly embrace them."

Boyce agreed that the program has been a success.

"The folks I've talked with want more of it," he said.

Neighborhood Pride went through Hungarian Village in 2003, Cassidy said.

She liked it.

"It's what they should be doing all the time," she said.

Chris Gawronski, president of the Clintonville Area Commission, also wants to see more code-enforcement officers. In Clintonville, residents complain about deteriorating rental properties and trash in alleys.

Cassidy said the city needs to shorten the time to board up and sell vacant homes.

The city is putting together a new policy to speedily board up and sell problem vacant properties when owners can't be found.

"We're going to take it immediately to court," said City Attorney Richard C. Pfeiffer Jr., who is working on the policy.

Some communities have come up with other ways to enforce building codes.

A small staff also hampers Nashville, Tenn., which has only 17 property-standards inspectors and supervisors for Nashville and Davidson County, an area with an estimated population of 572,475.

In Nashville, 35 neighborhood groups are part of that city's NOTICE — Neighborhoods Organized to Initiate Code Enforcement — program. The city trains and deputizes community leaders to cite property owners for tall grass, junk cars, yard debris, graffiti and unsanitary conditions, said Linda Lichtenberger, a supervisor for the program.

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