



Vacant Property Challenges: A Neighborhood Dialogue Workshop

**Tumbleweed Recreation Center
June 15, 2010**

Workshop Summary

On Tuesday June 15, 2010, Neighborhood Programs offered this workshop to provide a forum for homeowners to speak out on the challenges their neighborhoods are facing due to vacant properties. Chandler neighborhoods experienced a growth in vacant properties due to the down turn in the housing market; many of these vacant properties are a result of foreclosures. The workshop provided an opportunity for residents to engage in roundtable discussions to express their concerns and share information on how their communities are addressing vacant properties.

In addition, a presentation was provided by Debra Campbell, Community Manager with Capital Consultants Management Corporation. Ms. Campbell has 25 years of property management experience and has managed large communities that have experienced high volumes of foreclosures. Ms. Campbell understands the financial and visual impacts that vacant properties bring to communities, which is why she volunteered her time to provide Chandler residents information and best practices in dealing with these issues.

WHAT ARE VACANT PROPERTIES?

The National Vacant Properties Campaign (NVPC) defines vacant properties as vacant residential, commercial, and industrial buildings and lots that exhibit one or both of the following traits:

1. The site poses a threat to public safety (meeting the definition of a public nuisance), or
2. The owners or managers neglect the fundamental duties of property ownership (e.g., they fail to pay taxes or utility bills, default on mortgages, or carry liens against the property.)

For more information on NVPC visit: <http://www.vacantproperties.org>



Welcome

Judy Ramos, Neighborhood Programs Coordinator, welcomed everyone in attendance and introduced the following special guests:

- Members of the Neighborhood Advisory Committee (NAC), a seven member Mayor appointed committee. The NAC meets every second Tuesday of the month to discuss neighborhood related issues and hear resident concerns.
- Presenter Debra Campbell, Community Manager with Capital Consultants Management Corporation
- Tim Holland with Maricopa County Assessor's Office.

A brief review of the that evening's agenda was provided.

General Program Overview

Jennifer Morrison, Neighborhood Resources Director for the City of Chandler expressed the importance of this meeting not only in discussing the challenges neighborhoods are facing due to vacant properties, but also as a tool in trying to find solutions to these challenges.

Jennifer outlined the structure and role of the Neighborhood Resources Division which is comprised of Neighborhood Programs, Code

Enforcement, Community Development, Diversity Office and Housing & Redevelopment. The role of Neighborhood Resources is to provide services and resources to Chandler residents and neighborhoods in order to keep neighborhoods well maintained and provide basic needs of low-income individuals and families.

Neighborhood Programs Office is the best point of contact to address neighborhood issues-including foreclosure problems.

Introductions

As part of the introductions residents were asked to include the reasons that prompted them to attend this workshop. Some of the reasons included:

- Blight issues (weeds in front and back yards)
- Concern about health issues (green pools & mosquitoes)
- Concerns about safety and crime issues (vandalism)
- Abandoned, bank-owned, and short sale homes
- Looking for resources and solutions to address problems
- Seeking legal opinion

Roundtable Discussions

The core of the workshop was based on the discussions that took place at the tables to address two important questions that would give a sense of the current challenges facing neighborhoods and what neighborhood groups were doing to address the challenges.

Discussion Topic #1:

**How are vacant properties affecting your neighborhood?
What challenges are you facing?**

Table # 1

Effects:

- ✓ Weeds, trash, theft, vandalism & fire safety issues
- ✓ Homeless people squatting in vacant homes

Challenges:

- ✓ Too much inventory of unoccupied homes
- ✓ City lacking power to enforce code/prevent repeat offenses
- ✓ No HOAs for traditional neighborhoods – City is only resource
- ✓ Banks not taking responsibility to maintain homes

Table # 2:

Effects:

- ✓ Overgrown/dry weeds & trees,
- ✓ Green pools
- ✓ Vandalism (cars being broken into)
- ✓ Values of homes declining

Challenges:

- ✓ Difficulty for people trying to sell their home
- ✓ Affecting commercial areas (ex: Basha's)
- ✓ Lots of rentals and turnovers (180 homes 24-empty, 22-legal rentals, 6-unregistered rentals)

Table # 3:

Effects:

- ✓ Esthetics
- ✓ Fire safety issue (weeds)
- ✓ Quality of life

Challenges:

- ✓ Obtaining legal access to properties (front and back yards)
- ✓ Holding owner liable / finding owners
- ✓ HOA fees increasing and finances eroding
- ✓ Obtaining self-help money

Table # 4:

Effects:

- ✓ Loss of revenue for HOAs & loss of property value
- ✓ Neighborhood upkeep diminishing
- ✓ Increase of crime (vandalism)
- ✓ Safety and health issues (weeds & green pools)

Challenges:

- ✓ Finding owners/lenders of vacant properties
- ✓ Legal concerns/property rights
- ✓ Who pays for the clean up of vacant properties and the houses in disrepair pending foreclosures

Table # 5:

Effects:

- ✓ Community esthetics suffer
- ✓ Financial loss (ghost town)

Challenges:

- ✓ Getting others to help/work
- ✓ Legal aspects of volunteering (legal concerns)



Discussion Topic #2:

**How is your neighborhood addressing these challenges?
Can you share a success story on how your neighborhood has dealt with this issue?**

Table # 1:

Addressing challenges:

- ✓ Formed non-profit organization to help neighbors/properties
- ✓ Neighbors are cleaning up vacant yards (non-HOA),
- ✓ Communities looking into asking law enforcement to help supervise clean-ups
- ✓ Calling complaints in to City (non-HOA neighborhoods)

Success story:

HOA removed a tree that had fallen over and could have been a potential fire hazard.

Table # 2:

Addressing challenges:

- ✓ Having positive attitude
- ✓ Staying proactive
- ✓ Having block watch parties (neighbors get to know each other)
- ✓ Getting local businesses involved

Success story:

HOA president for Ray Manor worked with the board to turn negative attitudes into positive attitudes. He helped initiate block watch and held block watch events to get neighbors involved. Now everyone is involved and helps one another. Currently there are only two properties with weeds throughout their entire neighborhood.

Table # 3:

Addressing challenges:

- ✓ Lien & cleans for front yards
- ✓ Use small claims court for to get money back used for lien and cleans
- ✓ Contact Code Enforcement for assistance with properties

Success story:

HOA has been using small claims court to collect funds used to clean up vacant properties.

Table # 4:

Addressing challenges:

- ✓ Taking initiative and placing more efforts on finding owners/lenders of vacant properties
- ✓ Taping into volunteer sources (scouts & church groups)
- ✓ Taping into City services
- ✓ Organizing community social events
- ✓ Organizing neighborhood clean-ups and

Success story:

"Lets pull together" and " Self-help" program built into CC&Rs to help with neighborhood clean-ups.

Table #5:

Addressing challenges:

- ✓ Temporarily suspended fines for late payment (debt forgiveness)

Success story:

"We Care" release group – volunteers look for properties that need care. Still in progress, program has not gone live yet. Community is looking at liability issues and developing forms.

Summary

Without the benefit of sufficient time to explore the information shared, each table found a common perspective on issues associated with vacant properties. This collective information will be used by the Neighborhood Resources Division as we look to find ways to provide continued assistance in the well-being of Chandler neighborhoods.

Neighborhood Programs is available to help and work with neighborhoods in order make improvements. Current programs and services are already in place that can assist with many of the concerns brought forward. Programs and services such as Block Watch (Police), bulk pick-up (Solid Waste), education/enforcement of property standards, (Code Enforcement), and Neighborhood Improvement Grants (Neighborhood Programs) to name a few. Neighborhood Programs sees this workshop as the first of future discussion that the City of Chandler will be conducting with regard to this matter.

More Information visit Neighborhood Resources at <http://www.chandleraz.gov/default.aspx?pageid=149>

Presentation—Foreclosure Survival - Neighborhood Solutions

Presentation by Debra Campbell

Johnson Ranch Community Association is a master planned community comprised of 6,000 homes located in Queen Creek, Arizona. In 2009, Johnson Ranch experienced a rapid growth in foreclosures, up to 1,058 at one time. Deborah Campbell, Community Manager with Capital Consultants Management Corporation established a “Self-Help” Program that assisted in mitigating the negative visual and financial effects of vacant properties in the community. The “Self-Help” Program was established to help improve the condition of the Community by addressing the issues of blight and the collection of unpaid HOA dues resulting from vacant properties. Debra states that the success of the “Self-Help” Program is due to the positive synergy and innovative solutions that HOAs and neighbors foster. The program was approved and adopted as part of the CC&Rs by the HOA Board. Below are a few examples of the “Self-Help” Program:

- ✓ contract with a landscape service to assist with yard issues such as overgrown weeds
- ✓ maintain a lawyer for advice on legal issues
- ✓ provide insurance coverage for volunteers to address safety issues
- ✓ provide a removal service for abandoned appliances
- ✓ provide a maintenance service for trash pick-up
- ✓ enforce administrative fines of \$350 for the same violation within a six month period
- ✓ implement a collection process to collect money from banks. Working Capital allows the management company to collect on the money spent to maintain vacant homes

More tips from Debra Campbell

Living Next to a Foreclosed Property

Consider the advantages to working with neighbors to maintain and water trees at a vacant home on your block.

Regularly remove door hangers and other accumulation of paper at the front door. If necessary place items left behind that detract (trash can) or may be harmful (refrigerator) behind the gate in the back yard.

Are there projects a local Boy or Girl Scout troop would like to do to earn a badge?

Report “green” pools to proper city or county department for treatment.

Report problems you are not able to remedy, to your Association or local government agencies.

Report suspicious activity immediately.

Join or form your Block Watch Group

Recognize that your efforts to be part of the solution will pay dividends later.

Continue to be a “cheerleader” for your community!



Ways your Association Can Help

If the governing documents allow for it, ask your Board to provide approval for the clean up of unmaintained yards. Get a three-month weed warranty with the clean up.

If staff is available, perform limited services on foreclosed properties such as removal of accumulated trash at the front door, put trash cans behind the gate or schedule a bulk trash pick up if needed. Costs for these services are then added to the owners account.

Constantly provide education through the website, community newsletters, mailings etc. on the care and maintenance of the home and where to go for assistance as problems arise.

The Association should always work to advocate for all property owners.

Seek ways to celebrate and acknowledge the “good stuff” such as volunteer efforts that are occurring within the neighborhood and community.



Considerable research indicates that strong and cohesive neighborhoods and communities are linked to decreases in crime, better outcomes for children, and improved physical and mental health. The social support that a strong neighborhood may provide can serve as a buffer against various forms of adversity.

Associations and neighborhoods today face many challenges as a result of the current real estate market. Often members look to their Association to take care of the problems resulting from foreclosed properties.

The Community Association has limited authority to remedy many of these problems. If the Association has the authority to maintain a foreclosed property, members should understand that this care comes at a cost to all of the members.

*Debra Campbell,
Community Manager,
Capital Consultants
Management Corporation*