

September 20, 2009

## Camden must move on empty buildings

Decaying, abandoned properties make neighborhoods unsafe and must be fixed up or razed.

Most towns in South Jersey don't even have 9,800 buildings altogether. In Camden, 9,800 is the high end estimate on just the number of abandoned buildings in the city. Four thousand is the conservative estimate for the number of vacant structures in the city.

It's no wonder Camden remains mired as one of the poorest and most crime-ridden cities in America. Several thousand boarded up, decaying buildings would keep any community down.

State lawmakers gave Camden a legal tool five years ago to do something about this problem. The Abandoned Properties Rehabilitation Act of 2004 gives municipalities in the state the ability to wipe out or transfer tax liens or to use targeted eminent domain to take over blighted, empty buildings. The buildings can then be either torn down, or handed to a nonprofit organization interested in rehabilitating the structure.

This is a powerful tool. Yet the city is not using it nearly enough. The City Council authorized using the act soon after it passed in Trenton, but city administrators never followed through after that.

Empty homes and businesses are one of Camden's great plagues. Every street where there is even one abandoned home is affected. Vacant buildings attract drug users and other criminals, homeless people and infesting animals such as feral cats, rats, roaches and termites. When these boarded up structures are rowhomes or portions of duplexes, those who live in the attached home or homes see their own properties dragged down.

And safety, of course, is an issue. Parents fear that their children will play in these unsafe properties. The drug users, thieves and others they attract can make just walking past abandoned homes a risk.

Everyone with a stake in the matter knows these problems and agrees on them. So five years after the state gave Camden this tool to address abandoned properties, far more should be done.

Buying forgotten and abandoned properties in Camden is a difficult, lengthy and costly process, we understand that. The city does not have unlimited funds at its disposal or a large staff dedicated solely to working on these cases. But it does have far more state aid than almost every other community in New Jersey. Money shouldn't be an excuse.

And acquiring abandoned properties is made difficult by owners who've died or long moved away or either can't sell or won't sell for any number of reasons.

But these are hurdles that simply must be overcome, no matter how long it takes. Having thousands of abandoned properties in Camden should be intolerable.

In Newark, a city much larger than Camden, but with far fewer abandoned buildings, officials are using the state law. They started with a list of 46 targeted properties in 2007, then published a second list of 340 properties in 2008 with 110 more slated to be added, according to Adam Zipkin of Newark's housing and economic development department. Just being on the list and facing the threat of losing what they own has spurred 50 property owners to start rehabilitating their buildings.

Camden could achieve such results. The city needs to act. It has been handed a valuable tool for

improving neighborhoods and clearing out true blight. Letting that tool gather dust is unacceptable.

---