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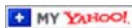
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Posted on Fri, Aug. 28, 2009

Camden's 'ugliest house' a hazard, but still standing

By Matthew Spolar
Inquirer Staff Writer

As about 40 people looked on, a Camden activist climbed the step at 923 N. 27th St. in the city's Cramer Hill section yesterday and tacked a bright-orange "Imminent Hazard" sign to the entrance of the abandoned shell.

It wasn't easy. The unhinged door, propped against piles of debris inside the ruined home, nearly caved in at the touch.

The house was the newly crowned "winner" of a contest devised by Camden Churches Organized for the People (CCOP), in which residents cast votes to decide which of 13 abandoned properties was the area's "ugliest house." The nonprofit group hopes the negative attention will spur Camden officials to become more aggressive about demolishing eyesores.

"It's not just about getting publicity. It's about letting the city know we're serious about this problem," the Rev. Jud Weiksnar of St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church said yesterday.

The impetus for the project was a campaign begun by Weiksnar in March 2006 to have the city remove a deteriorating house next to the church's school on nearby River Road.

More than three years later, Weiksnar estimated, he's still about 15 months away from his goal.

Last month, Weiksnar and CCOP staff took one hour to come up with a baker's dozen houses they thought should be demolished. The group took photos and asked parishioners at St. Anthony, Hope Memorial Baptist Church, and St. Joseph's Pro-Cathedral to select the worst.

The 125-year-old house at 923 N. 27th won, with 51 out of about 300 votes cast. The contest organizers requested that the property be demolished within 48 hours.

The runner-up, a house erected in 1793 that served as a stop on the Underground Railroad, landed 35 votes. Had it won, the organizers planned to recommend that the historic structure be renovated rather than razed, said CCOP executive director Josh Chisholm.

The 27th Street home was ravaged by fire last August and is a refuge for drug users, residents say. The graffiti-covered gray-and-red structure has a gaping hole in its second-floor exterior. The first floor is a heap of trash and rotten timber.

According to city records, the property was purchased in 1980 for \$7,000 and in 2004 had an assessed value of \$28,000. According to the tax assessor's office, the owner is behind \$56,000 in taxes and utilities.

Aida Soriano, 26, moved next door in late June. She said she often looks out her bathroom window and sees people using drugs behind the house. Last month, she said, she left rat poison inside, in an effort to kill rodents that were creeping onto her property.

Mayor Gwendolyn Faison, who attended yesterday's event, said she was disgusted by the conditions she saw and hoped to have the house demolished before she leaves office after November's election.

"I am one mayor that's sick and tired of trash and abandoned houses," Faison said. "As soon as I leave here, I'm going to be on the phone."

The problem with abandoned and hazardous properties in Camden runs deep. There are 199 abandoned homes in Cramer Hill - a neighborhood that accounts for about an eighth of the city's population - and 57 are in the same condition as yesterday's winner, said Manny Delgado, director of the Cramer Hill Community Development Corp.



CLEM MURRAY / Staff Photographer

A banner declares the ugliest house in Camden. Helping to hang it was Brother Jerry Hudson (right).



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There are as many as 9,800 vacant buildings in Camden - 35 percent of the city's structures, according to Stephen Singer, head of CamConnect, a Camden research firm. Most are abandoned, he said.

City Public Works Director Pat Keating said that demolishing the house on 27th Street was "doable," but "not feasible."

"Unless they know how they're going to pay for it," he said.

Keating has \$26,000 at his disposal to complete emergency demolitions of homes on the city's imminent-hazard list. The 27th Street property, which he said would cost about \$19,000 to raze, was added to the list in October 2008.

The 28 homes now on the list will not be handled on a first-come, first-served basis, Keating said. When money arrives, he asks code enforcement officials what is in most severe need of demolition. During the last fiscal year, 36 homes were eliminated from the imminent-hazard list at a cost of roughly \$667,000, he said.

Keating said that his department could receive up to \$500,000 in federal block grant funding by the end of the month. Yesterday's contest winner might be taken down with that money, he said.

The house is the first in a row of five abandoned properties on 27th Street near River Road. Keating said it would be more cost-effective to get rid of all five at once, though only yesterday's winner is on the high-priority list.

In 2005, a revitalization report proposed knocking the entire row down and replacing it with commercial development.

"The neighborhood isn't going to move forward until these homes are demolished," Delgado said.

Following the event, which concluded with the cutting of a cake decorated with the likeness of the dilapidated winner, a bulldozer happened to drive down the street.

On the sidewalk, members of the throng - many of whom carried signs shaped like bulldozers - shouted in excitement, hoping that help had arrived.

"Aqui!" yelled Martha Checo, a 32-year-old member of St. Anthony's.

The driver smiled, but shook his head and continued on.

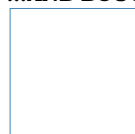
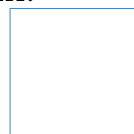

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