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Ugliest-home contest focuses on city eyesores

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Call it an anti-beauty contest.

St. Anthony of Padua Parish in Cramer Hill is asking residents to vote for the neighborhood's ugliest home.

Earlier this month, Father Jud Weiksna and staff from Camden Churches Organized for People photographed 13 of the most notorious eyesores in the neighborhood, all believed to be abandoned. They pasted the full-page prints on the doorway to the church with signs asking parishioners to cast their vote inside. Ballots were also distributed to other churches and the Cramer Hill Community Development Corp.

"It was just a tongue-in-cheek thing to try and get the city to start doing something with these abandoned homes," said Brother Jerry Hudson, of St. Anthony's.

That's been a perennial issue for the impoverished city. Stephen Singer, executive director of CAMConnect, estimated that the city has between 4,000 and 8,000 abandoned homes.

Cramer Hill is home to 195 of those buildings, according to surveys done for a neighborhood plan that was released this spring.

Hudson said several of the "contestants" they selected have been the site of multiple fires, yet the burned-out structure remains standing. One just 30 feet from the church's school dubbed "Ron's House" after its late owner, Ron Hurlburt, looks like "a gated community" compared to those with major fire damage, he said.

Church leaders said Hurlburt's home has been vandalized at least three times and become a hangout for drug addicts since he died about three years ago. They've cleaned the property four times since then and say they've found a contractor willing to tear down the building for free. But they can't do that unless they officially acquire the property, which would require paying off \$25,000 worth of liens.

Donald Russell, a Camden native and member of St. Anthony's, remembers when that home and two others on the 2200 block of River Avenue were occupied. Now, he said, it's upsetting to drive by them.

"I knew the people for years and after they passed away it really became an eyesore," he said.

Together, the two homes at 2212 and 2210 River Ave. have \$106,700 of outstanding liens. Another contestant at 2413 Sherman Ave. has \$74,300.

Russell, 57, said he wishes the city could build new homes on those properties, or at the very least, tear them down.

"At least it'd be better than a chance of somebody burning it down," he said.

Whether calling attention to the massive stock of abandoned homes will effect change, Cramer Hill CDC executive director Manny Delgado said it can't hurt. His organization has a list of 57 abandoned homes in the neighborhood that they consider beyond repair.

Maybe if city officials and residents heard more about these dangerous properties, they would be motivated to do something about abandoned homes that could be fixed up before they turn into drug houses or fire hazards, he said.

"Let's not let the other ones get to the point that these have," Delgado said.

Sandy Johnson, director of development and planning for the city and the head of the Camden Redevelopment Agency, said the challenge of doing anything with the abandoned properties has always been money.

Between unpaid taxes and unpaid bills for board-ups, these properties may have tens of thousands of dollars in tax liens on them. Even if the city can dismiss those liens, Johnson said, it would have to find the money to fix up or tear down the building. Demolitions alone can cost anywhere from \$18,000 to \$30,000.

Johnson said she wasn't aware of any efforts to rehabilitate abandoned homes, but noted that the city has made it a priority to demolish vacant homes deemed "imminent" safety hazards. Delgado said he understands that the city doesn't have the money to keep up with the number of abandoned buildings that need to be demolished or acquired, but argued that officials could do more.

For example, he said, the city has the ability to take possession of properties that have been vacant for at least six months through the state Abandoned Properties Rehabilitation Act. Council members authorized the creation of an abandoned properties list in 2004, but the city never followed through.

If the city began actively acquiring these properties, Delgado said, it could enlist any number of local nonprofit groups to seek grant funding to refurbish the buildings and get them back on the tax rolls.

Anyone is welcome to stop by the church on 2818 River Ave. during business hours to cast a vote. The ballot also includes a space to nominate the most beautiful home in Cramer Hill.

The "winner" of the contest will be announced during a public ceremony on Aug. 27, the same day as the Feast of St. Monica, Patron Saint of Patience.

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