

City to examine vacant lots

Incentives targeted before fines: officials

BY DAVID HUTTON, THE STARPHOENIX NOVEMBER 16, 2009

James McGovern enjoys the quiet but hates the mess.

The 42-year-old King George neighbourhood resident lives next door to three empty lots that, until a recent cleanup by the owner, looked like a decrepit enchanted forest with unkempt trees, overgrown grass, broken-down vehicles and a teetering wood shack marked with graffiti.

Beside the lots sit two dilapidated, two-storey houses with boarded up windows and doors, crumbling front porches and contravention notices from the city stapled to the doors.

The lots, left undeveloped by their owner for more than 20 years, have been the site of fires and parties and have contributed to broken-window syndrome in the area, neighbours say.

"It's fun because there's no neighbours," McGovern said. "But you don't know what's going to go on there, you don't know if the houses will be broken into and become a crack house.

"You don't know what's living over there."

It's a question that has vexed city planners for years: What to do with the scores of vacant lots that have become gritty, littered and often frightening symbols of urban decay.

An administration report on the question goes to city council tonight.

For the first time, the city surveyed the number of lots that sit empty in the core, finding an estimated 613 vacant sites, totalling close to 400 acres, inside of Circle Drive, the report says.

That's the equivalent of an entire new neighbourhood worth of vacancies.

It's a problem the city is looking to tackle first through development incentives before turning to stronger fines, officials say.

"We had no idea the number of sites was that high," said Alan Wallace, a senior city planner and the report's author. "We're paying for the maintenance of the street, yet the site isn't being used and instead we're building new things on the outskirts of the city."

The stories of how the lots became vacant are wide-ranging. Some are what remain of a fire or a demolition project, others stay vacant as their owners wait to sell until real estate prices rise higher while others are tied up in family disputes.

Whatever the reason, the city's vacant land and abandoned buildings are empty of activity but full of potential, Wallace said.

He points to programs in Hamilton and Edmonton where the owners of vacant sites, whether commercial or residential, are asked to give the city a statement of intent and a timeline for development.

"We're going to look at what's working on the carrot side and not the stick side yet," Wallace said of the city's desire to encourage development of the lots.

Some mechanism needs to be put in place to encourage development and also penalize those who are sitting on serviced land, said Coun. Pat Lorje. As the city sprawls, developing vacant property is critical to reducing operating costs, she said.

The city needs to consider a new tax class specifically for vacant properties, or an even more fundamental shift to attribute a property's tax to the land, rather than the structure built on it -- a change that would make vacant land costlier to hold.

The city's property tax structure, Lorje said, fails to leverage vacant land into productive uses. Levelling fines that grow each year a property isn't developed would help spur development, she said.

"Vacant lots end up generally being kind of everybody's land and nobody's land," Lorje said. "Too often they become abandoned, overrun with weeds and debris and sometimes end up being party pits."

Other cities have had success turning vacant sites into urban farms or community gardens. And with a growing community gardening movement that could be an option here, she said, if an incentive is put in place for the owners.

While incentive programs are needed, the city needs to focus on its own lots first, said Coun. Maurice Neault.

Of the 613 lots identified in the report, the city itself owns more than 150, Wallace said.

But Neault said the city should be focusing on turning as many of the larger sites as possible into 'pocket parks' with recreational equipment, small hockey rinks and basketball courts, for instance.

The next step would be to offer sponsorship opportunities to place a corporate logo in the parks to help shift the costs to the private sector, enticing companies to renovate and maintain dozens of vacant lots the city now own, he said.

"We need monkey bars and some pavement," he said. "Put the things in there they (area residents) need and they will use them."

dhutton@sp.canwest.com

© Copyright (c) The StarPhoenix