

WATERTOWN CITY COUNCIL

AD HOC COMMITTEE RE: RENTAL REGISTRATION/INSPECTION

Meeting

6/23/14, City Council Chambers - 1:00 p.m. – 2:30 p.m.

Attendance: Stephen Jennings, Joe Butler, Reg Schweitzer, Gary Beasley, Kurt Hauk, Andrew Nichols, John Doldo, Michelle Capone, Rev. Fred Garry, Frank Arquitt. Excused: Brian Murray, Shawn McWayne.

Steve Jennings facilitated the meeting, and provided an update. Suggested individuals to join this committee were contacted and accepted invitations to serve. Mr. Jennings contacted NYCOM to obtain more information. NYCOM provided rental registration/inspection codes from a number of New York cities. Mr. Jennings shared codes from the cities of Albany, Schenectady, and Buffalo per NYCOM counsel. The City of Buffalo was suggested as the model that might most be considered for replication. Committee members asked that all codes provided by NYCOM be sent to them; Mr. Jennings will e-mail all following this meeting. The remainder of the meeting centered on the pros and cons of having or not having a rental registration/inspection (RR/I) program. Discussion followed:

- It was noted great change had occurred in the City with the expansion periods of Fort Drum, which created great opportunities, but great challenges as well – challenges we are still grappling with today.
- It was suggested greater effort is needed to tear down blighted housing stock vs. establishing a RR/I program. But the City can't just tear down what is deemed as blight when the properties are actively owned and taxed, with taxes paid and current. Also, the City can't afford massive demolition and re-design of neighborhoods to ensure appropriate green space. It was noted we need better tools to save housing and neighborhoods. RR/I is a vital tool.
- There was discussion on demographics, that many people living in blighted housing and neighborhoods represent a significant number of working poor. RR/I would level the playing field for poor individuals and families with very limited options.
- RR/I offers the City the ability to be proactive vs. reactive.
- Greater education has to be done with tenants to call and complain vs. having a RR/I program. This suggestion was countered with the point that RR/I is actually the way to truly educate tenants.
- It was argued that RR/I will be perceived as a negative, but the majority of the committee did not concur.
- It was noted that some landlords are predatory, and make decent money renting sub-standard housing to poor people. RR/I is the fundamental step to address sub-standard housing city-wide, and in particular neighborhoods. RR/I is the first step to improve bad neighborhoods. It was recognized that there are elderly people who've long owned their own homes are living in neighborhoods that are falling apart.
- We have to keep people living in the City, and adopt the policies that make people want to live here.
- RR/I sets a standard for the City, and puts bad landlords on notice that this City is serious about its housing stock.
- The number of absentee landlords is far larger than a few years ago. It is a real problem.
- RR/I needs to be the first leg of a comprehensive housing strategy for the City. A multi-year plan/strategy was suggested.
- The annual increase in CDBG monies will greatly help us do this work in the City. Some of these monies can be used to incentivize qualifying property owners.

ACTIONS:

The meeting concluded with members tasked to study the code templates from other cities, and to think about what our specific objectives for the City of Watertown should be. Mr. Jennings will provide all code templates provided by NYCOM to the committee members via e-mail, and will also reach out to the City of Buffalo to set up a teleconference.

NEXT MEETING: To be determined, pending Buffalo representative availability.

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