

Community groups discuss Fresno's blighted homes

By Rory
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Community groups and Fresno State students and staff gathered Saturday in the Kirk Elementary cafeteria in southwest Fresno to discuss exactly what a blighted home is -- and how to fix what they call a serious problem in the city.

Esther Delahay of Lowell Community Development Corp. explained to the crowd of over 100 people just how the city classifies a home as blighted. It's a boarded-up, vacant property that poses a public nuisance, which the city defines as cheapening the quality of life, standard of living and property values for neighbors.

Delahay said that a property can be boarded up and not be a blight. Boarding up a property is fine, she said, so long as it is done properly and well-maintained. She added that city code specifies that properties can only be boarded up as a temporary solution.

Janine Nkosi, a sociology professor at Fresno State, said that "temporary" is ambiguous and contributes to the problem. She called for a change in the city code that would specify exactly how long a property can be boarded up before the owner is held accountable.

Kirk Elementary Vice Principal Denise Romero shared a story involving a student last week at the school, which has a blighted home for a next-door neighbor in the 2000 block of East Belgravia Avenue.

Last week, Romero said, a very upset young boy told her he had been walking home near Church and Poppy avenues when he passed by a blighted home. There were several men in the home's back yard who yelled, "Hey white boy, come over here -- I've got something to show you." He then ran home.

Romero went to the home and noticed that even though it had clearly been abandoned for years, it had a "For Rent" sign posted. She said that she called the number listed, and someone told her that the problem would be fixed. But as of Saturday, she said, no one had come out to fix it.

Gabriel Pacheco, whose mother lives next door to a blighted home, said that the abandoned property has gone pretty much untouched for over a decade. "People come out and say they are fixing it, but they don't really do anything. It's hard because people judge our community when they see the place and think we don't care about our neighborhood -- when we really do."

Barbara Fiske of Lowell Neighborhood Association & Union de Familias told the group that there are several ways that each Fresno resident can help end the problem. She asked residents to be diligent in reporting any criminal activity to police, whether that means calling 911 during a crime or calling the non-emergency number of (559) 621-7000 to report potential crimes.

Fiske also asked the community to call Fresno County Code Enforcement at (559) 621-8400 for any violations, which include trash buildup, broken glass or boards or graffiti. An entire list of violations is available on the Fresno County website. She stressed the importance of asking the operator for a report number, which she said indicates that the enforcement office is keeping a written record of the report.

Clayton Whited, a Fresno State student, is spearheading a project that aims to identify every blighted home in Fresno. He established a Blight Report Hotline at (559) 473-1427 that anyone can use to report a blighted home. His student-run team will investigate each report and add any new entries to a massive online database that has already flagged hundreds of properties.

Nkosi ended the presentation by sharing some of the steps other communities are taking to combat the issue. She said that Alameda County in the Bay Area requires property owners to pay a fee of more than \$600 to register every boarded-up property. She said that this pays for a code check and maintains a detailed record of when a property was boarded up.

Nkosi believes that Fresno County taxpayers are absorbing most of the cost for addressing blighted homes. "It costs money for code enforcement, fire and police to come out. Every single person in the city feels this cost."

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