

## Campaign to address abandoned, blighted properties in Fresno reaches 100-day mark

By Carmen George



This photo montage created by Faith In Community shows 100 Fresno homes that are boarded up. Such housing leads to blighted neighborhoods, the advocacy group says. Saturday marked the organization's 100th day of showing boarded homes in Faith In Community's social media campaign.

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A neighborhood tour and meeting to discuss abandoned properties is planned Dec. 2 from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. at Yokomi Elementary School, 2323 E. McKenzie Ave. in Fresno.

A campaign to highlight the toll of abandoned and blighted properties on Fresno residents reached its 100-day mark on Saturday.

For more than three months, the nonprofit advocacy group Faith in Community has been posting a photo a day of one of these neglected properties on its Facebook page and in its Twitter feed.

"The #OneHealthyFresno theme we are using for this campaign is a part of a broader Building Healthy Communities coalition campaign to bring attention and resources back to our south Fresno neighborhoods," said Andy Levine, executive director of Faith in Community.

These neighborhoods have been "left behind" by sprawl and neglect for too long, Levine said.

Leaders involved in the campaign said city officials have made strides in addressing the problem — such as establishing a mayor/City Council code enforcement task force in October, which includes a number of community partners — but more still needs to be done.

Janine Nkosi, a sociology professor at Fresno State, has taken an active role in the campaign over the last two years, along with more than 300 of her students.

Classwork involves documenting substandard and boarded-up homes in Fresno, along with research: Evaluating Fresno's codes and comparing them to other cities.

She said Fresno State's partnership with the city and community groups is "exciting" — collaboration is the basis for "real change" — but Nkosi said the way Fresno's code is written to address neglected properties is "very problematic." For example, Fresno's code allows abandoned properties to exist "temporarily" but doesn't specify exactly how long that means. As a result, some properties have remained boarded up for years, she said.

And in Fresno, property owners aren't required to submit a vacant property plan — a clear timeline showing how a property will be brought up-to-standard for rent or sale — unless the property is cited for a code violation or was foreclosed, Nkosi said.

Additionally, the first time one of these plans is filed in Fresno, there is no required fee. That becomes a burden on taxpayers, Nkosi said, who end up paying more for code enforcement, police and firefighters who are often dispatched to these properties. These costs easily amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars, she said.

Another concern: Plywood that's often nailed to windows to secure abandoned properties. In some cities, these boards are disguised as windows, she said, which helps keep property values up and isn't such a blight to the community.

Nkosi and her students are working to compile a more complete list of blighted or abandoned properties in Fresno, along with a more specific estimate of the cost to taxpayers.

Fresno spokesman Mark Standriff said city officials "applaud" Faith In Community's efforts and "encourage them to continue to focus on the most critical issues facing our neighborhoods today."

Standriff said the nonprofit has highlighted one of the central points of the city's 2035 General Plan, which "prioritizes reinvestment and revitalization of Fresno's established neighborhoods." Additionally, the new code enforcement task force is meeting monthly and "has already started creating a plan to deal with housing conditions and public nuisances, which impact the quality of life in our neighborhoods."

Nkosi said most of Fresno's abandoned or blighted properties are in south Fresno.

"If you just go into any one of these neighborhoods and walk around, you'll see children walking to school who are 5, 6, 7 years old," Nkosi said. "That alone is enough to inspire anyone to want to get involved in these efforts to create sustainable change."

In the Lowell neighborhood, there are 95 vacant properties — about 10% of the entire community. The majority are managed by JD Homes, Nkosi said. It's estimated JD Homes manages more than 3,000 units in Fresno, the majority of them low income and in central and southern parts of town.

Previously, Elaine Robles-McGraw, the city's community revitalization division manager, said in 2013 there were 431 code violations against JD Homes and affiliates. Of those, 132 were housing code violations, which relate to more serious issues — like problems with structural support, roofing, plumbing or electrical.

Early this year, attorney Warren Paboojian, hired by JD Homes to explore claims against the firm, said "JD Home Rentals remains ready, willing and able to address all maintenance or repair issues" and that the company has 90

maintenance employees who work hard to “provide affordable housing.”

But many community leaders say the company — and the city — needs to do more to ensure safe and secure housing.

To help, Nkosi said community members are invited to attend a meeting and tour of abandoned and blighted properties that’s been tentatively set for Dec. 2 from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. at Yokomi Elementary School, 2323 E. McKenzie Ave.

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