

Fresno City Hall to lot owners: Kill your weeds or face fines

By George
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Howard Lacy, a supervisor with the Fresno code enforcement division, looks over a vacant Fulton Street lot, choked with weeds about 3-feet-tall, next to a restored turn-of-the-century home with a manicured yard.

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April 15 at Fresno City Hall isn't just Tax Day — it's also Weed Abatement Day.

The City Council on Thursday will debate proposed rules for this year's weed abatement program.

City Hall's deal for owners of empty lots is simple:

- Even with a dry winter, vacant fields are full of weeds several feet high.
- Owners have until April 15 to get rid of the weeds.
- If you don't, City Hall says, we'll get rid of them for you. Then we'll send you the bill. It will include a fine. Test us if you insist. But you'd better have a spare \$1,000 or more.

"This is all about public safety," code enforcement manager Del Estabrooke says. "I don't want to get to August and find us putting out fires with water we can't afford to use because someone didn't cut their weeds."

Council President Oliver Baines says he doesn't expect the rules to get much grief from his colleagues on the dais.

"We're here to serve our constituents," Baines says. "Our constituents have made it very clear to us that code

enforcement issues like weed abatement are very important to them.”

Fresno officials are taking weeds seriously for two reasons.

First, Fresno has more than 4,000 empty lots. Nature will run her course with all that dirt. Left alone, the green weeds of March turn into dangerous tinder by summer.

Flick a glowing cigarette butt on such a field in mid-August, Estabrooke says, and “poof! It goes right up in flames.”

In a city full of buildings and people, well, the image speaks for itself.

Estabrooke and his staff have weed abatement down to a science. He says owners of empty lots have been contacted by mail. Responsibilities and potential penalties were spelled out.

Just in case that wasn't enough, Estabrooke says, an ad in *The Bee* delivered the warning a second time.

City officials know where to find each of the 4,000-plus lots. When they find one (starting April 15) full of weeds, they'll arrange to have the lot cleared. This includes rubbish such as tires, garbage and old sofas.

The city works with two outside contractors to do the work. Lots under five acres get completely cleaned. Lots bigger than five acres (some in the city go 20 acres or more) get fire breaks.

City Hall then sends the bill to the property owner. The lot's size and the amount of rubbish hauled away affect the amount of financial pain.

“We don't want to fine anybody,” Estabrooke says. “Everybody, please, get out there and cut your weeds.”

Estabrooke says City Hall will be equally diligent in ridding city-owned lots (several hundred of them) of weeds before the deadline.

The second reason for City Hall's passion for weed abatement is the evolving nature of code enforcement in general.

Mayor Ashley Swearengin took office in January 2009 promising to revitalize Fresno's older neighborhoods. The effort has been varied.

The council's approval late last year of a general plan focused on infill development got the public's attention. Swearengin's two-year fight to secure an abundant supply of water for the 21st century was another key victory. The mayor has pursued economic development and new ways to help the homeless with an eye on how those initiatives fit into the big picture.

Through it all, code enforcement has been the pebble in the shoe.

If Fresnans are to live closer to each other, then they have to get along. City code — be it for abandoned buildings, cars parked on the front lawn or a field full of weeds — provides basic rules of community. There are lots of rules.

But how is government to enforce those rules in the land of liberty? Swearengin and council members haven't figured that out. A code enforcement committee, with city officials and community leaders, has been meeting for months. Answers are still to come.

Baines, a committee member, says it's sufficient now for City Hall to successfully tackle something obvious such as weed abatement.

Getting docked \$1,000 has a way of concentrating a property owner's mind, he says.

“That's real money,” Baines says. “You know what? It should be real money. Weed abatement is something property owners should be able to handle relatively painlessly. We are encouraging them to be responsible.”

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