

Fresno City Council takes first step toward cleaning blighted vacant houses

By George
Hostetter



A boarded-up home in Fresno is seen in an August 2014 file photo.

ERIC PAUL ZAMORA — THE FRESNO BEE [Buy Photo](#)

Fresno City Hall on Thursday took the first step toward reforming a code-enforcement system viewed by some as an enabler of inner-city blight.

Just about everything suggests future steps will be as hard-fought as this one.

The City Council by a 5-2 vote approved the introduction of an ordinance designed to rid Fresno of blighted vacant houses.

Council Members Sal Quintero and Steve Brandau voted no.

The council at a future meeting will vote on adopting the ordinance.

The ordinance is largely the work of a council-mayor task force that included real-estate experts and community activists. Mayor Ashley Swearengin sees the law as pivotal to City Hall's quest to rebuild the quality of life in blight-plagued neighborhoods.

“We have to find a way to take care of our existing neighborhoods,” Swearingin said after the vote. “For years we’ve spent a lot of time and energy building new neighborhoods, which are very lovely and have added a lot of value to our community. But we’ve now got to place equal attention on our existing neighborhoods and make sure we have the right tools in place to keep them as strong as possible.”

Andy Levine, who followed the law’s long genesis as intently as the mayor, was more succinct.

“This is historic,” said Levine, executive director of Faith in Community, a local coalition of faith institutions. He paused, then added, “We’ll stay at it.”

Code is the book of rules that makes it possible for a diverse population to live close together in relative harmony. Enforcement is the strong arm of government making sure everyone obeys the rules.

Swearingin and the council last year agreed that Fresno’s code-enforcement system needed a major overhaul. Where to start? The answer was a task force that decided to tackle what was deemed Fresno’s No. 1 code-enforcement challenge — run-down vacant houses with weeds in the yards and plywood over the windows and doors.

The 12-page ordinance lists all the steps that owners must take with their vacant houses to ensure they don’t get on City Hall’s bad side.

For example, the yards must be neat and the house exterior maintained in good condition. Windows visible from a public right-of-way can’t be secured with plywood. A rigid transparent material must be used. Violators face hefty fines.

City officials said the old law had holes and wasn’t aggressively enforced. They said enforcement of the new law is a priority.

The council got into a spirited debate over the wording and origin of a city-run registry for vacant properties. This issue sparked Brandau’s no vote. Council Member Clint Olivier voted for the ordinance, but couldn’t hide his skepticism with several provisions.

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