

EDITORIAL: New vacant house ordinance is good for Fresno



A new Fresno ordinance requires property owners to register vacant homes with the city after 60 days. Yards must be kept neat and exteriors maintained in good condition. Windows and entries no longer are allowed to be covered with plywood. And ordinance violators face hefty fines.

CRAIG KOHLRUSS — THE FRESNO BEE [Buy Photo](#)

If you believe democracy is dying and government is dysfunctional, we offer in refutation this example of community activists, businesses and elected leaders teaming up to address Fresno's problem with blighted vacant homes.

When she first ran for mayor in 2008, Ashley Swearingin vowed to take on the slumlords who prey on the poor. With Fresno's municipal government facing a financial crisis, Swearingin put her pledge on the back burner.

In stepped the nonprofit Faith in Community, south Fresno neighborhood groups and Fresno State students. They took inventory of boarded-up vacant homes that weren't being cared for — some of which hadn't been rented out for years — and pressured City Hall to act.

If you are on Twitter, you might have seen Faith in Community's daily pictures of boarded-up houses.

A task force was formed of grassroots activists, rental property owners, civic leaders and City Council Members Oliver Baines, Paul Caprioglio and Clint Olivier. The result was an ordinance passed April 30. It is designed to rid Fresno of the estimated 2,000 blighted vacant houses that contribute to crime, endanger our firefighters and decimate the property values of neighboring homes.

The ordinance requires property owners to register vacant homes with the city after 30 days. Yards must be kept neat

and exteriors maintained in good condition. Windows and entries no longer are allowed to be covered with plywood. And ordinance violators face hefty fines.

Equally important: The ordinance is backed by funding in Swearingin's proposed 2015-16 budget for a code-enforcement team that will enforce the stiffer requirements.

"We've developed a much more aggressive strategy to make immediate improvements in our neighborhoods," Swearingin said. "That's what our residents want. We are all going to see dramatic improvements in our neighborhoods in just the next few months as our new Blight Team begins its work."

Said Faith in Community Executive Director Andy Levine: "This is historic." After a pause, Levine added, "We'll stay at it."

While working on the ordinance, some task force members advocated for mandatory interior inspections by the city of all previously blighted vacant properties before they are rented. Their goal was to ensure that renters don't live in slum conditions.

This should be the case, but as Swearingin explained in an interview with an Editorial Board member, her first focus is on stabilizing neighborhoods by eliminating exterior blight. She said that the second stage of the effort will be to address interior conditions.

We concur with Swearingin's approach. Given the magnitude of the problem, it's best to proceed one step at a time. See what works and what doesn't work and adjust the program.

But our endorsement of the ordinance passed by the council should not be misconstrued as a pass for slumlords. Every Fresno renter should be able to live in a house or apartment that is free of mold and insects and doesn't have plumbing, electrical or roofing problems.

Even if you own your home or live in a nice apartment, Fresno's blighted vacant homes affect you. As stated in the task force's "minority report," the Fresno Police Department considers 45% of abandoned properties to be public nuisances because they are used for drug sales, prostitution and gang activities. In other words, they are a drain on law-enforcement funding and a threat to public safety.

In addition, the number of Fresno arson fires has risen dramatically in conjunction with the rise in blighted vacant properties. Again, this is a drain on Fire Department funding and a threat to public safety.

By authoring an ordinance backed by proper funding and the mayor's blessing, the City Council, rental property owners and activists are making Fresno better for everyone.