

Fresno City Hall gets ready for surge in code appeals

By George Hostetter
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Fresno is reforming the way code enforcement appeals are handled, another sign of City Hall's commitment to stable neighborhoods.

Code enforcement deals with quality-of-life issues like improper security measures at vacant houses and unsightly trash or rusting cars in front yards. Violations result in citations. People may appeal.

The City Council last week took steps to ensure that the process has enough hearing officers should things get extra busy.

The council also refined how public records are managed and told the city attorney to go to court if necessary to collect big unpaid fines.

The council approved introduction of these ordinance amendments. Things won't be official until the council adopts the changes, which could happen in October.

Council Member Lee Brand wrote the amendments.

"Code enforcement involves very serious issues," Brand said on Monday. "What we're dealing with, in essence, is the people's court. I want to make sure we get the appeal process right and people can find out easily what's going on."

Added City Manager Bruce Rudd: "I have no problem with that."

You shouldn't have to live with an eyesore in your neighborhood.

Council Member Lee Brand on neighborhoods plagued with vacant blighted houses

The amendments include:

- The City Attorney's Office will monitor how many hours the hearing officer works per month. If that figure gets too high, the city is authorized to hire temporary hearing officers to handle the extra work.
- Hearings will be digitally sound recorded and made available for public review at the City Clerk's Office or website.
- A hearing officer's salary shall not exceed \$100,000 a year or \$10,000 per month.
- The City Attorney's Office will ensure that the hearing officer's decisions comply with the law and the city's master fee list.
- The City Attorney's Office will take legal action to collect unpaid fines/liens exceeding \$1,000 if it is shown that such effort is cost-effective.

Rudd said he will meet with Code Enforcement Division Manager Del Estabrooke and staff this week to discuss the new vacant blighted building law.

More than 1,000 vacant single-family residences recently were identified as violating the law.

Rudd said landlords have been warned many times that a day of reckoning is coming. He said some landlords are fixing their properties. He said others have yet to act.

Rudd said Estabrooke's team is sending letters to the latter group that includes a rundown of each property's violations. The fine is \$250 per violation per day.

Rudd said he hopes that gets the slow-pokes' attention.

Code enforcement is a key part of Mayor Ashley Swearengin's effort to revitalize inner-city neighborhoods. She and nonprofit advocacy groups are especially concerned with the effect of vacant blighted houses in struggling neighborhoods.

People who get code enforcement tickets can appeal. Brand said he expects the hearing officer to get a lot more work as Estabrooke's crew settles into a routine.

"We're gearing up for what we're going to see in our city," Brand said.

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