Town Continues Efforts to Manage Blighted, Vacant Properties

Week of September 24, 2018

During the later stages of summer, our team at Town Hall goes through the annual process of crafting a budget for the following year, one that we will present to the Town Board in early October. It's an exhaustive process that involves careful review of every single line-item and reflects our priorities and strategies for the coming fiscal year.

Our Department of Community Development, among many other things, oversees code enforcement. Every year, we budget for anticipated revenue received for property maintenance code violations, the most common of these being overgrown grass. We have made no secret that addressing blighted - often vacant - properties is a key priority at Town Hall, one that we have no choice but to address, head on.

My proposed spending plan for 2019 will see a substantial reduction in anticipated revenue from property maintenance violations. The glass is half full side of me would lament at the lost revenue. However, make no mistake, this is a positive forecast, one I hope is the result of a focused strategy we have executed over the past few years to manage these vacant “zombie” homes.

Starting with the Great Recession a decade ago, municipalities like Irondequoit have been left to deal with a growing number of vacant homes, often the result of foreclosure. It is frustrating in the sense that a Town like Irondequoit is left to deal with a serious problem that is caused by factors outside our control; yet, threatens our quality of life.

Beginning first with the development of a vacant property registry under the leadership of former Supervisor Bello, we have continued to augment our capabilities to both index the properties, communicate with the owner or entity tasked with maintaining the property, and then enforcing our code swiftly, when violations occur.

This is not a problem that can be solved in an office. Our code enforcement team has been more proactive in not just ensuring compliance with the code, but also engaging property owners; often working hard to contact the bank or management company that maintains a vacant home while it is in limbo.

Technology has been our ally, as well. In 2017, we were one of the only towns in Upstate New York to be accepted into an initiative spearheaded by the Attorney General’s office to help municipalities address and manage blighted and vacant property. Using a very effective software system, we have been able to break down silos to integrate the many different types of data we collect.

Our most effective partner in this effort remains our residents who keep is informed and hold us accountable. We are making progress, but this problem is by no means resolved. I hope this budget item signals the beginning of a trend. Thankfully, it comes at a time when we are taking steps to even further strengthen our efforts to manage these blighted properties.