

Blight Commission Meeting  
January 14, 2020 @ 1:00 pm

In Attendance: Dennis Marker, City Manager; Ken Murchison, CEO & Zoning Administrator; Penny Thompson, Tax Assessor & Building Official; Paul Camping, Chair of Citizens Advisory Board for Residential & Urban Renewal, John Swanberg, President ACFS&L; Phil Cyr, Caribou Nursing Home Administrator; Robert White, Planning Board Chairman; Christine Solman, Planning Board Secretary; Denise Lausier, Executive Assistant City Manager's Office

Dennis Marker chaired the meeting. Planning Board has been invited to be a part of these discussions. Some new ordinances may need to be adopted, being a part of this will help the Planning Board in their discussions.

The Commission goals outlined by the Council:

1. Gain consensus for developing a blight strategy with categories and definition of each category.
2. Assess nature and extent of blight within the different categories.
3. Develop strategies and priorities of the different categories through flowcharts of authority, financial and problem solving.
4. Review tools required to implement problem solving.
5. A report of findings to the Council by May 1<sup>st</sup> 2020.

Dennis Marker opened the meeting reviewing these goals. It has been recognized there is a blight issue in the community, how do we address it?

- Look at "hot spots" to tackle.
- Blight survey done on the community as a whole.
- Then map out a property level survey of the community.
- Define categories of blight.
- Before #3, look at the tools available.
- Identify properties, how to utilize tools into problem solving aspect.

Phil Cyr commented on goals #1 and #2 that perhaps staff already would have an idea on blight and categories of blight within the community because they look at housing now as far as assessing and code enforcement. Dennis Marker stated that staff does have that already with assessing and notices of violations. Also, we have the GIS system with parcel data. Ken Murchison stated that we have the latest parcel data from UMPI and will be able to incorporate blight data for the community. Need to go property to property to assess and also identify properties having blight characteristics. Phil Cyr questioned if tax acquired properties are a major element of blight. Dennis Marker stated that they are a small percentage of the issues.

Dennis Marker commented that for categories of blight, each property could be scored by roofs, siding, landscaping etc. Staff members, Ken Murchison and Penny Thompson will work on

some information in helping the group develop categories for blight consistent with already available assessing protocols. The categories will be worked on as a group at the next meeting.

Dennis Marker identified some tools that may be available such as CDBG funding and possible beautification committee that gives awards to those with most improved properties.

Paul Camping gave some insight. He brought up owner occupied homes and stated that in the interest of fairness, we need to do the same throughout the community. Paul offered a project name for the initiative – “safer stronger blight free neighborhoods for Caribou’s future”. He also commented that if tools were in place, Birdseye would have been cleaned up within a year. This is a research & recommendation committee at this point, to bring info back to Council. He spoke on enforcement at staff level which may involve new ordinances.

Paul Camping then gave three points:

- Public outreach – should do this as often as possible with a variety of medias – website, newspaper, a letter to go out with tax bills. Penny Thompson stated that she is going to be writing articles for the Aroostook Republican from her department, the first article is on blight.
- Administration – a land bank is a financial vehicle that is self-sustaining. Old tax acquired properties can go into the land bank, economic development funds, one-time funding for neighborhood development.
- Enforcement component of the blight plan – Paul recommended citations go out issued by the police department for blight. Robert White commented that this will need a new set of ordinances. Penny Thompson also gave an overview of the process when she was Code Enforcement Officer. She would deliver the land use citations with a police escort to the property owners, but she was the one with the authority to deliver the citations per local ordinance, the officers were for protection. Penny also voiced her concerns that many ordinances contradict each other, those need to be cleaned up.

Ken Murchison pointed out that steps have already been made in 2-3 of these goals. Already gaining consensus, already beginning assessing nature and developing a task force.

Penny Thompson stated that many properties would be older people with limited resources. Ken Murchison developed a page of what resources are currently available to them to help; if they need a new roof or a heating system, etc.

Penny Thompson also shared with the Board that everything is done through local ordinance and the process to change things is in local ordinance. Dangerous buildings, nuisance ordinance, life safety and fire codes. Penny stated that we need to build towards voluntary compliance to make neighborhoods as nice as they can be.

Property level surveys will be done by staff, Ken Murchison and Penny Thompson. After discussion, the goal is to start the surveys now and complete them within a month, then take a month to update GIS. Complete by April, have April to review and look at properties and how to move forward.

Robert White commented that we would also need to identify what is missing in the ordinances.

Ken Murchison is introducing this to the Age Friendly group tonight as “building value back into properties.”

Phil Cyr recommended reaching out to RSVP, that perhaps they can help clean up properties. These are volunteers willing to give of their time and their skills. Would just need to buy any materials needed.

John Swanberg said that as far as financing available perhaps CEGC and RLF with the City may be able to help.

Upon Commission discussion, focus for the next meeting will be to identify the tools needed to implement problem solving and discussion of categories. Dennis Marker asked the Commission to be thinking about tools and to also be thinking about stakeholders and other groups that would have an interest.

Ken Murchison stated that the City website now has a page for the Blight Initiative under the Living in Caribou tab. Currently, the Citizens Advisory Board for Residential/Urban Renewal’s report is posted. <http://www.cariboumaine.org/index.php/living-in-caribou/blight-initiative/>

The next meeting is Tuesday, January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020 at 1:00 pm.

Timeline:

