

Blight Commission Meeting
February 25, 2020 @ 1:00 pm

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

Dennis Marker added a use perception column on the tools spreadsheet since the last meeting.

Ken Murchison recommends as tax acquired properties often goes back to the owners by quitclaim deed for back taxes; perhaps we should have a clause that the property needs to be cleaned up.

- Paul Camping commented that the land bank has funds to reimburse taxes owed. Then the land bank committee looks to see if it's worth selling for profit or needs to be demolished.
- Dennis Marker added that tax acquired properties needs sharpening as a tool. Liens go out in November, they have until January 31st to reclaim property. Phil Cyr questioned if the prior landowner has first priority. Dennis commented that after the January 31st deadline we are not required to give it back to the owner.

Each member was assigned tools at the last meeting to research and they wrote a one page memo on the tools assigned.

Workplans – Christine Solman:

Christine Solman explained that a workplan is a resolution for properties that are in violation of City codes. It would be a more formal plan of action holding all parties accountable to correction of property defects if needed. This will require new policies & procedures and ordinances to be developed with the involvement and contributions of code enforcement, tax assessing, the City attorney, City Council and Planning Board. Code violations will enter a resolution process and enforcement schedule that steps out an agreement between the City and a property owner to achieve compliance of City codes and ordinances. Ultimately a workplan would become the legal instrument in the City's initiative to correct violations and remove blight.

- John Swanberg gave an example - if all the windows need to be replaced in a building, it would take time, money and would require a workplan. If a smaller dollar amount, would be less time. With a \$20,000 project, would give a longer time frame.
- Christine Solman stated we could perhaps pull in resources such as CDBG funds.

Property Ombudsman – Ken Murchison:

Ken explained that property ombudsman is a liaison between the City and the landowner. Offers suggestions for work plans or consent agreements. He couldn't find local examples, but it has been used a lot in Canada and the UK. If someone is feeling that they have not

been treated equally by the City, this gives them an avenue to go to. Would need to be appointed by City Council. The ones Ken has researched are paid positions.

Licensing & Registering Rentals – Ken Murchison:

Ken explained this would treat them more like a business. Had a Planning Board member that is not in favor of putting this on just landlords. Ken also explained that there are advantages to the community by doing this. There are 1,061 rental units in Caribou assessed for this type of value. With brand new units we have a chance to inspect them with the building permit in hand. Sanford, Portland and South Portland have these in place. A concept of at least registering rental units so we know where they are. Perhaps offer for first three months with no fee and then charge a fee. Sanford Ordinance was well done. Some even treat the single family vacant homes the same way, some are charging license fees.

- Phil Cyr questioned as far as inspecting. Dennis Marker stated that we are supposed to inspect commercial once a year. Discussion on yearly commercial inspections not being done due to staffing and time. Dennis Marker said that it is an issue we are working through.
- Phil Cyr commented that we don't want to be an obstacle to those wanting a business.

Landlord Laws – Penny Thompson:

Dennis Marker gave an overview of Penny's reports. Dwellings need to be safe and habitable. Outline of Maine Warranty of Habitability Act. Housing inspects rental units for federal laws and guidelines. Those landlords servicing Section 8 are in a sense registered and inspected.

Court Rule 80K – Penny Thompson:

Dennis Marker gave an overview. Training program enables staff to court ready documents to go to court for land use laws. Nuisance issues, misuse of property.

Land Banking – Paul Camping:

Purpose of a land bank and what it can do for us. Paul Camping gave an example with the Birdseye Plant - it has been abandoned almost twenty years, situated on the main drag, for people coming into Caribou that is their first impression. Under dangerous buildings, if a land bank was in place, through eminent domain, the City could seize the property, use money from the land bank to pay the owner for his loss. A land bank is an independent and separate vehicle. The City Council would appoint Trustees over the funds. Could act quickly to remediate these situations. A few other examples: Caribou Trailer Park, at Lazy Acres Trailer Park under health and safety, the septic backed up and pooled on the ground. Property across from NMDC owned by Michaud & Michaud Trucking where a building collapsed in the front yard with no attempt to clean up. Would be able to use a land bank for these. Ken Murchison stated that there has been ongoing work with Michaud & Michaud Trucking. Paul Camping said that there would need to be money in this land bank account and it would not be part of the City's expense budget. Paul Camping gave a list of funding options in his report; should be able to fund through a variety of these options. It takes the burden away from the City Council and allows the appointed board to do the work. Five buildings are

slated to be taken down, one burned, one collapsed. There are ten houses we could take down, a dozen barns. Also, two at the end of Patten Street.

- Phil Cyr questioned if it would be a separate legal entity. Paul Camping said that it would be as an enterprise fund. Dennis Marker stated that it could still be under the City's umbrella.
- Dennis Marker commented that TIF funds are state approved and there are programs attached to them. Land banking is not there now, we would need to ask our program be amended to add. Dennis Marker also stated that there is \$800,000 in revolving loan funds in coordination with CEGC.
- Phil Cyr commented that when Brian Hammel was with the LDA, he applied for economic development funds to tear down dilapidated buildings; there were millions of dollars.
- Dennis Marker stated that CDBG funds can be used, these are grants with match requirements. These are federally funded, state administered with an annual application process.
- Dennis Marker also stated that there are federal economic development grants every year. Also, we are going after EPA funds to add to the Brownsfield Clean Up funds for Birdseye.

Beautification Committee – Phil Cyr:

Phil has spoken to five florists and greenhouses to try and unite them in a beautification effort. Wants to revive the Caribou Garden Club. Been working with Patty Corriveau who owns the Thistle Shop and is in the Ladies Auxiliary. Many that were in the Garden Club are now older and in Florida for the winter. They are willing to guide new younger members, they don't have the energy to do it themselves. Hoping to get florists together to have a sale weekend, if registered in the beautification contest, you get 10% off. We could slice up the City in different grids and have five or six winners each month. Could have High School students that need to do so many hours of community service help out and perhaps put them together with public works. A lot is hinging on the Caribou Garden Club for launching a beautification contest.

- Christine Solman suggested perhaps putting an insert in the Aroostook Republican. Phil Cyr commented to perhaps have coupons and certificates from businesses in town.
- Ken Murchison stated that Future Farmers have a green house as well.

Dennis Marker stated that a lot of great work so far has been done looking at tools. Need to put together a short synopsis on each tool. Dennis talked about creating a document on Google Docs where each Blight Commission member can add information.

Ken Murchison gave a blight survey update. Initial outreach, sending out notices of violations. Haven't heard back from a lady on Midland Street, been contacting contractors. House on Country Road, owned by people in California, have not heard back. Michaud & Michaud Trucking, getting Carl Soderberg on the job. Ken and Penny Thompson did their first drive by of properties, they just scratched the surface.

Ken Murchison stated that with the Family Self Sufficiency program and Land Banking, we may be able to get properties back under ownership with qualified families.

Paul Camping commented that we don't want to make people homeless. For people living in properties that shouldn't be lived in, perhaps there could be some sort of swap of properties. Phil Cyr commented that some won't leave their properties, some may but to be ready for some who won't.

Next meeting; Tuesday, March 31, 2020 at 1:00 pm. Dennis Marker stated that we need to work on the blight survey and GIS mapping. Having the next meeting a few weeks out will give time to get the narrative together and to set up Google Docs.