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“Demolition of Abandoned Properties”



A property owner moves out of state and decides it's not worth the hassle to sell his dilapidated house before he leaves so it sits on the lot slowly deteriorating as rodents move in and the roof leaks water onto the floors.

This is one of many scenarios resulting in 10-20 such homes at any one time to sit empty and decaying in Norfolk.

“Sometimes it's abandoned because the taxes haven't been paid

and the county can't find the owner or the house has been foreclosed on. Each property has a story of its own,” said Trent Howard, Prevention Manager and Assistant Fire Chief for the City of Norfolk.

Without routine maintenance, the house can develop a foundation problem, a roof leak or an electrical problem if the wiring is outdated. Fixes can cost anywhere from \$20,000 to \$50,000 or more. Once a structure is too far gone, the owner may decide it doesn't make sense to fix it up and pay the taxes on it so he abandons it.

An empty house is cause for concern for Howard and co-worker John Kouba, City of Norfolk Health Official.

“It's a health and safety issue. If it's unsafe for someone to be in the house then it's our duty to act,” Howard said. Repairing or demolishing the house will rid the neighborhood of an eyesore, health danger and fire hazard.

Knowing which houses are unsafe or abandoned can be a tricky business. Howard said his department may find out about a house or apartment that is unfit for occupancy from a tenant, public safety officials or a neighbor. They may get a call that a house has been vandalized and then look inside to find that no one is living there.

“If we have any concerns about a property we'll request an inspection from the owner or tenant. City officials trained in the administration of building, electrical, mechanical and plumbing codes will inspect the building for any safety violations,” Kouba said.

A list of what needs to be done to bring the house up to code is then given to the property owner. If there are life threatening safety concerns found in the structure, it may be locked up until the issues are resolved.

“If we can't get in touch readily with the owner, we'll post a letter on the house that it has been condemned and the owner has 60 days to make the repairs or demolish it,” Howard said adding that this timeline can be complicated by loans and liens on the property.

Costs for clearing the lot of a condemned building may exceed \$10,000. If asbestos or lead paint is found in the house then a hazardous waste contractor is required to do removal of any asbestos and lead paint. This expense may add up to \$6,000 to the demolition expense. It also costs another \$2000 to shut off water and sewer lines that are connected to the house. Fill soil also has to be hauled in when the structure is removed. Trees may have to be cut down by a tree removal contractor.

The fire division is presently overseeing the demolition of five homes in Norfolk. The owners and/or lien holders have the responsibility for the demolition. In extreme cases where the owner cannot be located or the responsible parties are without any resources to complete the demolition public funds can be utilized for the demolition. In those cases liens are placed against the property in an effort to recover the public money at a later date.

“Citizens ask why the fire department can't burn an old house down as a training exercise. First of all, the heat from doing so will likely melt the siding on neighboring homes. There may be carcinogenic concerns in the smoke if the house contains asbestos or other pollutants. The City of Norfolk maintains a training facility which provides a safe environment for learning to fight fires,” Howard said.

For any questions about a house or property that may be a health or safety hazard, contact the codes department at 402-844-2060.