



# Options to Address Blight and Building Maintenance

Board Work Session

12-16-2020

- Background
- Comparison of three tools:
  - Spot Blight Abatement
  - Tax Abatement
  - Property Maintenance Code
- Conclusion
- Board discussion/direction to staff

# Agenda

## Background: Why is this important?

- FY 20-22 Strategic Plan: identifies revitalizing “aging urban neighborhoods” as one of the Board’s high priorities
- Comprehensive Plan: Development Areas will be vibrant active places with attractive neighborhoods

*Blighted and deteriorated properties can have an economic and environmental impact on property and lead to criminal activities and other public nuisances*

# Background: Current Regulations

- uncontrolled vegetation (*County Code § 7-501 et seq.*)
- stagnant water (*County Code § 7-505 et seq.*)
- inoperable vehicles (*County Code § 9-500*)
- trash and refuse (*County Code § 13-302*)
- safety/health-related upkeep of residential rental properties (Virginia Uniform Statewide Building Code (USBC) § 104.1), and
- unsafe buildings and structures (*County Code § 5-300 et seq.*)
- Zoning Ordinance provisions that prohibit junk yards and the keeping of inoperable vehicles.
- other tools in County Attorney's 2/11/19 memo

## Background: Shared Limitations

- Neither the County's existing authority nor available tools can address all problems.
- Most/all available tools do not and cannot address:
  - Aesthetics
  - Vacancy/occupancy
- Most/all available tools are designed to address safety and habitability rather than appearances

# Tool 1: Spot Blight Abatement

## Brief Description:

Property-specific finding and plan, requiring owner action or County remediation at owner expense

## Use Elsewhere: Property-specific

## Strengths:

- a) Focused, property-specific
- b) Cost-efficient
- c) County experience
- d) Owner involvement

## Limitation:

May not address all aesthetic concerns

# Tool 2: Tax Abatement Program

## Brief Description:

Incentivizes improvements to or demolition of “derelict buildings” by abating the resulting taxes

Use Elsewhere: 9 localities (est.)

## Strength:

May incentivize developers/investors interested in tax savings on major investments

## Limitations:

- a) May not incentivize individual property owners, for whom tax savings are relatively minor
- b) May not address all aesthetic concerns

# Tool 3: Property Maintenance Code

## Brief Description:

Adoption of existing uniform statewide maintenance standards to improve safety and habitability

Use Elsewhere: 1/3 of localities (est.), mostly urban

## Strengths:

- a) Addresses a variety of maintenance issues
- b) Already adopted by many peer localities

## Limitations:

- a) Inflexible -- One size fits all
- b) Enabling authority for partial adoption is uncertain
- c) Would require substantial additional staffing (~50%-100% increase over existing Building staff)
- d) Applies only to post-1972 structures
- e) May not address aesthetic concerns
- f) May impose financial hardships on those least able to afford property improvements



# Maintenance/ Enforcement Dilemma:

- Certain property owners will aim for minimal compliance, whatever the standard.
- Yet raising the minimum standard increases both:
  - Maintenance costs for owners
  - Enforcement costs for the County
- Ideal: Balance between reasonable standards and compliance/enforcement costs



Is this blight?

A Maintenance Code violation?



Is this blight?  
A Maintenance Code violation?



# Conclusion

- No single tool can/will address all concerns, especially aesthetics.
- Of the three tools discussed today, staff recommends:
  - Continued use of spot blight abatement, as the most focused, cost-effective tool
  - Deferring consideration of tax abatements and/or the Property Maintenance Code unless/until they prove to be cost-effective or uniquely-suited solution(s).

## Board Discussion/ Direction to Staff

- Does the Board agree with staff's recommended use of spot blight abatement?
- Which other tool(s) (if any) should staff pursue?
  - Tax abatement program?
  - Property Maintenance Code?
- Any other direction(s) for staff?

# Localities with Property Maintenance Officials

