

City must target abandoned homes

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**Our position is:** *The city needs to be more aggressive in prodding owners of vacant homes.*

Indianapolis and increasingly its suburbs are faced with a growing blight of vacant homes.

Nearly one of 30 houses in Marion County was vacant last year. These 8,000-plus empty houses translate into urban blight, not just in Center Township, but also increasingly in outlying areas such as Pike, Lawrence and Washington townships.

Economic conditions have a lot to do with abandoned housing. "Probably 90 percent of the vacant properties are there because of foreclosures," Mildred Watkins, a former foreclosure specialist at Fannie Mae, told Star reporter John Fritze.

The city has the second-highest mortgage foreclosure rate in the country. And its home vacancy rate is considerably higher than in surrounding Midwestern cities facing similar economic woes.

That suggests more work needs to be done locally at the front end of the problem, providing tougher screening and better financial counseling for first-time home buyers.

At the other end of the spectrum, the city needs to do a better job of encouraging the sale, rehabilitation or demolition of houses that are vacant. Although city officials have created an initiative that publicizes the owners of the worst abandoned property and takes code violators to court, other strategies need to be tried.

Last July, Wilmington, Del., imposed escalating registration fees on owners of nearly 900 houses that have been vacant more than a year. When a house is vacant one year, the fee is \$500. If it remains vacant the next year, the fee goes up to \$1,000. The annual fee increases to \$2,000 when the house is vacant three to four years; \$3,500 after five to nine years; \$5,000 at 10 years; and an additional \$500 for each year of vacancy beyond 10 years.

Owners who show they are demolishing, renovating or selling a house can seek a one-time, one-year fee waiver. Nonprofit groups trying to renovate empty housing can seek a two-year waiver.

Since the program's inception, Wilmington has seen more than 300 construction permits for improvements valued in excess of \$7 million on the vacant housing, applications for 200 waivers and about \$2 million in fee revenue, says Jeffrey Starkey, the city's commissioner of licensing and inspection.

"What we were doing before wasn't working," he added, "This has gotten their attention."

Several neighborhoods in the Indianapolis area recently were hit by tornadoes and severe thunderstorms. But vacant homes, which breed blight and crime, ultimately can have an even more devastating impact. Little can be done about the weather. Blight is within our control.