

City categorizes vacant homes, creates map

Diana Alba Soular , Las Cruces Sun-News 6:39 p.m. MT Jan. 23, 2017



(Photo: Courtesy)



LAS CRUCES - City staff have assessed a list of [more than 200 properties](#) in Las Cruces that last year were considered vacant or abandoned — removing dozens of them that are now occupied and taking steps to fix the most serious problems.

The city also created a [map of the properties](#) being reviewed, which it posted on the city website.

City staff presented an update on the topic Monday to the Las Cruces City Council, saying that from an original list of 210 properties in the spring of 2016, 84 homes are now occupied and have been removed from the list. That's not because of action on the city's part, but rather because people have bought them or rented them out in the time since the list was created, according to city staff.

Of the remaining properties, 105 have been categorized into three levels of severity for posing nuisances or safety risks, according to Chief James Chavez of the Codes Enforcement and Animal Control Department. The remaining 21 properties are in the process of being assessed, he said.

Among the assessed properties, 54 are considered to be a minor problem, which means they are vacant but are in compliance with city codes, Chavez said.

"There's no ordinance that says it has to be occupied," Chavez said of homes in the city.

For another 45 of the assessed properties, the city has identified the owner or owners and there are no big problems, such as broken windows or safety hazards, Chavez said. However, there are environmental codes violations, such as weeds or trash, that need to be addressed.

Another half-dozen fall into the major nuisance category and are considered immediate public safety risks, Chavez said. For four of those, the city has followed a formal legal process to abate the property or address the major violations, which will result in a lien being filed on the parcels to cover the costs of the work. Two more will likely enter that process in the next two weeks, he said.

The properties all appear on a map created by the city, but Chavez said the 84 parcels no longer considered to be a problem will need be removed. Even so, the city is eyeing 40 to 50 other buildings for further review. The list will continually evolve, he said.

In response to some residents' concerns about vacant properties serving as a haven for criminal activity, city officials set up a committee of city staff called the Neighborhood Action Team. The group has been meeting on a weekly basis, said Interim Assistant City Manager Loretta Reyes.

Reyes said the group also plans to look at ways to improve neighborhoods beyond reviewing vacant and abandoned buildings. There are some programs in place, but others might be needed, she said.

"What are the options for a citizens' assistance program that we're currently not providing?" she asked.

Stanley Smith, a former homeless resident, said not all homeless people are able to stay in the Gospel Rescue Mission or at Camp Hope, the two main options for emergency shelter in the city. When they can't find a place to stay, they are likely to go to abandoned buildings.

"Where else are they going to go except in our neighborhoods?" he asked city councilors.

Several city councilors expressed support for the steps taken so far.

"This is something we've really needed for a long time," said City Councilor Gill Sorg. City staff said some changes are being proposed to tighten city environmental codes. A first-reading will be March 6, while a vote is slated for March 20.

Chavez said the process the city has undertaken in recent months has been helpful to his department because it sets up a structure and clarified the city's role in dealing with vacant and abandoned buildings.

"Before it was: 'OK, they're vacant; what do we do now?'" he said.

The city is also proposing to create a subcommittee of residents, who'd also be tasked with addressing neighborhood issues. Jamey Rickman, the city's council and constituent services coordinator, told councilors the city is planning to look for possible representatives from neighborhood watch groups, the city's historical preservation committee and other neighborhood groups throughout the city.

City Councilor Kasandra Gandara on Monday advocated that the city not make that committee separate from the Neighborhood Action Team, which is made up of city staff.

"I also want to strongly suggest you don't do another layer or a group," she said.

Chavez said anyone with questions about a specific property that's been reviewed by the city can call the codes enforcement office at 575-528-4100.

The Las Cruces Police Department gave an update in Monday's work session, which took place in city hall, about traffic enforcement operations. A total of 12,048 citations were issued in 2016 by the department's traffic division, which doesn't include traffic citations issued by officers in other divisions. In all last year, 380 arrests were made by the division for DWI.

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