

City of Topeka, Shawnee County to work to use tax foreclosure to help revitalize neighborhoods

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Shawnee County and Topeka's city government are partnering to use the county's tax foreclosure process to help revitalize neighborhoods in decline, County Commissioners Shelly Buhler and Bob Archer learned Thursday.

Megan Barrett, office manager for county counselor Jim Crawl, spoke about the effort at that morning's meeting, where Commission Chairman Kevin Cook was absent.

Barrett said the county and city are teaming up in conjunction with the Momentum 2022 economic development campaign to address blight, stimulate neighborhood revitalization and encourage new construction by using the tax foreclosure process the county uses to sell properties that have unpaid property taxes.

The county plans — in future tax foreclosure lawsuits it files — to focus in particular on areas the city is targeting through its "Team Up to Clean Up" neighborhood improvement campaign, Barrett said.

The city through that effort teams up with community partners to aid one neighborhood at a time by taking steps that include repairing infrastructure and helping homeowners make repairs.

The county is also looking to hold a "bare lot" judicial tax foreclosure sale, Barrett said. She said it has pinpointed various bare vacant lots that are eligible for tax foreclosure, and the city planning department has identified which are appropriate to become construction sites.

Tentative plans call for 50 such lots to be named in the lawsuit the county files to initiate foreclosure proceedings, Barrett said.

Those properties should draw interest from builders for reasons that include their having clear titles and being located in established neighborhoods with existing infrastructure, she said.

Officials involved with the city-county partnership will meet next week with city manager Brent Trout, and tentatively plan to speak Dec. 18 to the Topeka City Council, Barrett said.

Buhler told Barrett and Topeka neighborhood relations director Sasha Haehn — who was present but didn't speak — that she appreciated the "great teamwork" involved.

Commissioners also:

- Heard a report from Barrett on a judicial tax foreclosure sale the county held July 27 in which 39 properties were sold.
- Voted 2-0 to authorize Crowl's office to initiate judicial foreclosure proceedings against 155 properties with unpaid property taxes. Those properties aren't involved with the city-county partnership.
- Heard Archer speak positively of the snow removal work the public works department did this week in the county's unincorporated areas.
- Learned that the county health department trapped far fewer virus-carrying mosquitoes in Shawnee County this year than last year, though the total number trapped was about the same. The lower number of virus-carrying mosquitoes was likely due to this summer's being less rainy, commissioners were told.

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