

Fayette to take part in blight summit

By Patty Yauger pyauger@heraldstandard.com | Posted: Wednesday, October 1, 2014 2:00 am

Fayette County redevelopment authority representatives, municipal leaders and code enforcement officers will join with their Somerset County counterparts on Friday to discuss how to address the increasing blight across their communities.

The Somerset-Fayette Blight Summit will be held Friday at Seven Springs.

Andrew French, executive director of the county redevelopment authority, said that every municipality is struggling with blight and bringing together community leaders with those able to provide some guidance may help stem the problem.

“As the redevelopment authority for the the county, one of our primary responsibilities is to address blight,” he said, adding that the issue was the basis for the formation of authorities.

While the authority earmarks a portion of its funds for code enforcement or demolition in some county municipalities, it has taken a more strategic role in Brownsville to rid the historic town of dilapidated buildings, and turn over others to those with the resources to make needed improvements.

“What we’ve realized recently is that there are some new tools that have been created at the state level to help municipalities to address blighting influences and different approaches for municipalities depending upon their issues,” said French.

The overall program is called “Blight to Bright,” and emerged as communities called upon the General Assembly to replace antiquated laws that would allow counties and municipalities to locally address their particular blight issues.

“Blight has a tendency to have a ripple effect,” said French. “If you don’t address at a certain point in time, it can tip over a certain block or a certain community, and that’s what we’re trying to prevent.”

Connellsville representatives plan to attend the summit, said Tom Currey, city code enforcement officer.

Connellsville has begun discussions with its neighbors and the county to form a land bank that would allow locals to purchase abandoned properties before out-of-town “speculators” offer small sums of money at tax sales, but rarely invest in restoring or

demolishing the dilapidated structure. Instead, it becomes a burden to the community.

About 60 buildings in Connellsville are vacant and/or abandoned.

“It is a growing problem,” said Currey. “A vacant or abandoned property can be very costly to the city.

“Vacant houses attract delinquents to them. They steal the copper or wiring from them or use them as drug houses. Some even throw their garbage into an abandoned house.”

The garbage attracts vermin and the city then must step in to rid the property of the rats and rodents, at its own cost, said Currey.

“You have to have a police presence to ensure that no one gets inside and the responsibility of cutting grass oftentimes falls to the city because the owners are not taking care of the property,” he said. “At some point the city has to send someone up to board up the house to prohibit entry.”

Neighboring homeowners are typically the most impacted by an abandoned or vacant property.

“They are taking care of their property, but then look across the street and see a dump,” said Currey. “They become frustrated. It breaks their spirit and lessens their pride in their neighborhood.”

Guest speakers at the summit will be Liz Hersh, Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania executive director and Christopher Gulotta, founder of The Gulotta Group, an organization that provides technical assistance to community development and housing professionals.

Elected officials, planning agencies and non-profit community development agencies along with those interested in the blight to bright issue are welcome to attend.

For more information or to register, call French at 724-437-1547, ext. 210.