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Code enforcement effort targets Brownsville blight

By Christine Haines, Herald-Standard

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Donald Baugh, Brownsville code enforcement officer, works near the former Authenrith's building. (Dave Rafferty/Herald-Standard)

"This problem with code enforcement in Brownsville is probably about the worst in the state," Stumpf said. "We really believe that Brownsville can be a model for code enforcement in the state."

A full-time code enforcement officer and administrative assistant have been hired by the redevelopment authority to staff the

BROWNSVILLE - Inspections of downtown Brownsville buildings began Tuesday in an effort to eliminated blighted conditions in the borough.

The undertaking is known as Project B.R.I.G.H.T. Tomorrow, with the acronym standing for "Brownsville Revitalization Initiative for a Great Home Town. A \$150,000 state grant to the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority is funding the code enforcement efforts in downtown Brownsville, including funding for legal fees as cases are taken to court. The enforcement area contains 128 properties with 65 different owners, according to Project B.R.I.G.H.T. Tomorrow staff members.

The area targeted for intense code enforcement stretches from the Inter-County Bridge through downtown Brownsville to Arch Street and reaching up Arch Street to Cadwallader Street according to Andrew French, the executive director of the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority. Jeri Stumpf of the Governor's Office of Housing and Community Revitalization said the area has been targeted for enforcement because it has been declared blighted by the Fayette County Planning Commission.

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Advertise	Brownsville office for targeted code enforcement. While the two, code officer Donald Baugh and assistant Jessica Yuhas, have been working to build a database of the buildings in the targeted area, Tuesday was their first day on the job in Brownsville.
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Weddings And More	Baugh began by taking photographs and videos of the rooftops of the downtown buildings using the South Brownsville ladder truck along with fire official and part-time borough code enforcement officer Edward "Woody" Nicholson.
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Weekend Events	He found problems with the very first building he looked at on Market Street near the Cast Iron Bridge.
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HSTV Daily Schedule	"This building here is in very, very bad shape. There are holes in it. It looks like it might be where the air-conditioning units might have fallen through," Baugh said.
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Calendars	Stumpf said the video and photographs will add weight to the cases filed with the magisterial district judges who initially hear the cases, as well as if there are subsequent appeals to Fayette County Court.
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Local Interest	Stumpf said that when he was putting together information about the targeted area he asked the previous code enforcement officer for previous inspections.
2004 Community Choice Awards	"Not one building had been completely inspected inside and out," Stumpf said. "It's a safety issue."
Contact Information	Stumpf said the goal of the new code enforcement officer is to inspect each building in the targeted area inside and out.
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The Greene County Messenger	"The code enforcement officer has the right to inspect the interior of any property. However, the code enforcement officer has to be invited onto the property by the owner," Stumpf said.
Visit Our Calkins Media Sites	Stumpf said appointments will be made with the property owners in the area.
SECTION LINKS	"If, in fact, access is denied, they will go to court and get an order and the inspection can take place," Stumpf said.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Photo Gallery by Herald-Standard Photographer Dave Rafferty ● Photo Gallery by Herald-Standard Photographer Christine McCormick ● Photo Gallery by Herald-Standard Photographer Ed Cope 	Some of the more hazardous properties may not receive internal inspections, French said.
READER POLL	"Some of these you can do from the outside. If the roof is gone and the windows are out, you can basically tell the condition of the building without going inside," French said.
	Stumpf said train tracks run behind the Market Street buildings and he worries about what could happen in the community if a train carrying hazardous materials derailed behind Market Street, or if there were to be a fire in one of the buildings.
	"I have learned that the volunteer fire departments will not risk their lives by going into these buildings," Stumpf said.
	One building in the targeted area, the former Autenreith Building, is currently be torn down by the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority. Nearly the entire roof on the building has already collapsed onto the first floor, making demolition conditions hazardous, French said.

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Stumpf said the code enforcement in the targeted area will be fast-tracked, with computer tracking of each case so they don't fall through the cracks once a citation is issued.

The borough previously employed CodeSys for code enforcement, with a code officer in the borough one day a week, including any court appearances. Borough officials said that tended to drag the process out, with limited time for follow-up.

"The problem in the past was we had limited resources," French said. "We were limited not only on code enforcement, but also on the money for legal fees."

Stumpf said that shouldn't be the case under the new system.

"This is going to be very aggressive. We are going to cite the ones where there is the most need first. They will be given a reasonable time. If nothing is done, they will be cited again," Stumpf said.

Stumpf said that under state law, the fifth time a property owner is cited for failure to correct a problem at a property, the owner could be subject to criminal charges with a penalty of up to five years in jail.

"We want to get this corrected as soon as possible. People's lives are at stake," Stumpf said.

Stumpf said the code enforcement officer will work with property owners who are making an effort to correct maintenance deficiencies. Stumpf said the possibility of setting up a revolving loan fund for property owners who don't have the financial resources to fix up their buildings is also being considered, though evidence of financial need would be required, if that program is established.

Stumpf said property owners who are cited also have the option of tearing the dilapidated structure down, or turning them over to the redevelopment authority for renovation or demolition. Stumpf said the state would most likely come up with funding to help with the demolition if buildings are acquired by the redevelopment authority, with liens placed against the property to recover the cost of demolition in the event the land is sold.

Whether the dilapidated buildings are torn down or rehabilitated, Stumpf said, the property would then be available for development.

"It all starts with code enforcement. No developer is going to come and spend money here with the way the buildings are today," Stumpf said.

Stumpf said that if need be, eminent domain regulations could be put into place in the targeted area to eliminate blight and bring about economic revitalization in the community.

"The point is, something is going to happen here in Brownsville, something good," Stumpf said.

The Project B.R.I.G.H.T. Tomorrow office is located in the former Oddfellows Building, which has been renovated to accommodate the office and the People Place, an information clearinghouse for services and activities in the area.

Stumpf said the building itself is part of the economic revitalization plan for the community.

"If everything on both sides of the street looked like this building, it would look like downtown Uniontown," Stumpf said.

Brownsville Mayor Norma Ryan said the Oddfellows Building was acquired by the Brownsville Area Revitalization Corp.

following a recommendation from the Appalachian Regional Commission.

"Their recommendation was that a building in the center of town be the center of redevelopment efforts in our community," Ryan said.

The building will be open daily from 9 a.m. until 4:30 p.m.

"We're very excited that this is the first phase of a lot of activity in our community," Ryan said.

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