

HOUSING AND NEIGHBORHOODS

INTRODUCTION

The city's neighborhoods range from quiet wooded spots to bustling downtown environments, all within a relatively small geographic area. Overall, topography has helped the city keep a very condensed development footprint, offering many walkable areas. The following chapter contains the goals, policies and actions the city will take to grow and strengthen its neighborhoods to meet the future vision for the city and needs of its current and future residents.

GOALS, POLICIES AND ACTIONS

GOAL 1: PROVIDE HIGH QUALITY HOUSING OPTIONS THAT MEET A VARIETY OF NEEDS AND LIFESTYLES

Policy: Monitor housing supply and demand to proactively plan to meet needs.

Action: Maintain Up-to-Date Housing Needs Assessment

The housing needs assessment works to anticipate housing demand now and in the future as demographics change or previously unmet needs are identified to ensure the city's housing is best meeting the current and future needs of its population.

Action: Create a Municipal Housing Committee

While the city has a housing authority, it does not have a housing committee to track needs and work with a variety of public and private partners to facilitate the addition or improvement of housing units to better meet needs. They can also take a lead role in fundraising and doing some of the ground work to identify and secure sites (e.g., land banking) for future housing needs.

Policy: Support public, private and individual reinvestment into housing and neighborhood conditions.

Action: Support Non-profit Housing Renovation Program Activity

Non-profits can accept properties for renovation and either renting or resale. One program in Raleigh, NC called *Builders of Hope* accepts, or purchases for a low cost, older homes and performs a green gut rehabilitation of the interior to remove high costs to new owners for system repairs and upgrades while also removing potential health hazards like lead and asbestos. This model can help get market rate stock back up to quality after years of deferred maintenance and decay, while still keeping the exteriors historic integrity in place and avoiding unnecessary demolition.

Action: Update the Mill Revitalization District to Increase Flexibility

The city has added mill revitalization district language into its existing industrial districts as a special permit activity. The uses listed are fairly narrow in focus and should be revisited to add other uses such as retail, agriculture, or other options to meet a wider range of mill sites and reuse potential.

See also Historic Preservation chapter.



(Left) Three examples of mixed-income residential developments, more attractive and inclusive housing model than traditional all low-income housing developments (like the “high rise” on Ashland Street, below). Some of the more modern designs build on the precedent set by the MCLA Science and Innovation building (above).



Policy: Transition affordable housing stock to a mixed-income model.

Action: Prioritize Sites for New Mixed-Income Construction or Renovation

New sites, either through demolition or reuse (such as a vacant mill site) offer opportunities to add new housing units that meet the needs of specific demographics. This could include young professionals, artists, or seniors. Either way, while the city has a relatively high supply of affordable housing both individually and within the region, there is still unmet need and specific quality concerns. New developments should be mixed income to offer a more integrated community and shift the city away from the stigma and isolation that old-style developments can impose on those who live there.

Action: As Housing Authority Complexes Age, Rethink Their Shape, Location, and Function

Much of the affordable housing in the city is developed as “projects” concentrated areas of subsidized units physically removed from surrounding neighborhoods and lacking transportation connections and socially isolated through stigma. These environments dampen opportunities offered to residents and can result in higher incidence of crime. Modern practice has gotten away from the “project” concept in favor of mixed-income developments that de-concentrate poverty, remove stigma, and yield better outcomes for low-income residents. As public housing ages and requires significant investment and upgrades, the city and Housing Authority should explore options to demolish and rebuild units in a more modern, energy efficient, and mixed income format.

GOAL 2: ADDRESS BLIGHT AND IMPROVE PROPERTY VALUES

Policy: Empower neighborhoods and individuals to combat blight and disrepair conditions.

Action: Offer Creative Programs to Support Owner Action

Create programs such as free “rent-a-tool” programs, paint drop-off pick up sites, volunteer project teams or help-a-neighbor programs to help elderly or lower-income property owners access the resources they need to bring their property into compliance or otherwise maintain their properties.

Action: Continue Community Days of Service

Continue citywide day of service activities to target larger issues of trash buildup on vacant lots and open space areas. In addition, the city should work with major employers to do a workplace day of service program where they could tackle smaller projects, potentially including projects suggested or desired by neighborhood groups for beautification and anti-blight. This could also involve youth groups similar to the Greenagers model in south county.

See also – community garden policies in Food and Agriculture Section.

Policy: Improve issue property identification and enforcement procedures.

Action: Institute Neighborhood Walk-Thrus

On a regular basis, pull a team of public service and safety professionals to walk through each neighborhood to identify code violations, community development and service needs. Identify and prioritize actions within each neighborhood.

Action: Neighborhood Code Violation Monitors

Neighborhood volunteers are trained to identify code violations and report them to city personnel. This helps keep more eyes on the street to find and report issues to free up some staff time. These efforts can be strategically timed, such as a few months before major events and festivals in the city to help present a more attractive city to visitors.

Action: Adopt Vacant or Foreclosed Property Ordinance

The goal of the ordinance is to achieve compliance so that the City is better able to manage and respond to concerns about vacant or foreclosed properties. Similar ordinances have been adopted in Springfield, Boston, Lawrence, Lowell, Methuen, and Albany, New York.

Under the ordinance, the maintenance of vacant or foreclosed residential properties would require the owners to:

- Register their property with the City at a cost (e.g.\$100 per year);
- Provide the owner’s name and mailing address (which cannot be a P.O. Box) so that the City has a good address for service of legal notices;
- Identify as part of the registration (and post on the property) the 24-hour contact name, number, and address for a local property manager (either a person or company) who is located within 30 miles of the property; and
- Maintain the property on a weekly basis including keeping it secured.

The ordinance also requires that a property be registered as soon as a foreclosing process commences (with the delivery of a mortgagee’s notice of intent to foreclosure). The ordinance defines a vacant property as one that has not been legally occupied for 60 days or more and/or a property that is not occupied and not properly maintained or secured. Failure to comply with the registration requirement, or failure to maintain a registered property, can result in fines (e.g., up to \$300 per week) for non-compliance.

Action: Use GIS to Track Geography of Code Violations and Police Calls

As the City grows its GIS capability, efforts should be made to use addresses to track patterns of code violations and police calls to help identify and refine target areas. The use of police calls in addition to the code violation information can help draw the link between vacant and blighted properties and squatting or illegal activities that may gravitate to problem areas and vacancies. This can further help prioritize interventions where there is a social/safety and service impact as well as physical/aesthetic.

Action: Develop and institute a process for building code violations

Violators of the building code should have to follow a clear and deliberate process to either remediate their properties or be penalized. The process should be made transparent and be enforced for all.

Policy: Create progressive system to bring delinquent, tax title, and tax possession properties back into productive use.

Action: Maintain Property Inventory

The City should work to be proactive about identifying and tracking its tax lien properties to understand and be able to communicate the economic impact of those properties, view them on a map in relation to other criteria or target areas to help set priorities for intervention activities, and to generally help guide a comprehensive strategy to dealing with them. Utilize the Assessors Office’s Patriot Properties Computer Assisted Mass Appraisal (CAMA) software to its full potential to assist in this action.

Action: Streamline Receivership

The city should develop and utilize a receivership program in order to put tax lien properties back into use.

Action: Develop Reuse Strategy to Help Target Efforts

The city can build on the work of the plan and, with ongoing input from residents and other stakeholders, identify reuse options for specific areas. This could include preservation of single-family units, rental units, and transition of buildings to another use or demolition to allow for redevelopment or the creation of supportive spaces (e.g., parking) for adjacent properties.

Policy: Develop clear expectations and offer education for landlords.***Action: Rental Property Registration and Inspection***

Require landlords to register all rental units with the City. The City can inspect units prior to occupancy to ensure they are up to building and health code standards. The City can also offer incentives for landlords who have a track record of no findings such as reduced inspection fees and more time between inspections. In the case of landlords who repeatedly have violations, the timeframe can be shortened. Once notified a unit is not up to code, landlords have a timeframe to bring the unit back into compliance before fines are issued.

Action: Create Meaningful Incentives and Penalties to Support Action

Review and revise code enforcement penalties, with a focus on developing a clear penalty process and strong, supported enforcement.

Action: Develop Educational Materials for Future Landlords

Provide a primer for persons entering into the rental business, including permitting and code requirements, and contact information for relevant city staff. Reprint and put online the out of print Landlord/Tenant Handbook. Reach out with this information to real estate agents and banks who work with buyers early in the process.

GOAL 3: SUPPORT STRONG COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS WITHIN NEIGHBORHOODS

Policy: Collaborate to reduce crime in neighborhoods.***Action: Neighborhood Watch***

Work with interested neighborhoods to start a neighborhood watch program and install street signs to help make crime awareness more visible.

Action: Property Security Trainings

Partner with private business to create a grant-based community safety program that can educate owners and renters about how to make their homes more secure and less attractive to thieves. This could include a short class or demo and then free or reduced cost items such as safety lights, locks, window locks, etc.

Action: Neighborhood Beat Officers

Work to create stronger alignment between patrol officers and neighborhoods. In urban neighborhoods, this could include some bike or walking patrol. In more dispersed neighborhoods, this could simply be making sure all areas are patrolled with a certain frequency. Offer officer training on community relationship-building to help them implement this policy shift. The intent is to have officers who know and interact in both informal and formal ways within the communities they serve.

Action: Prioritize Safety Lighting Needs

Work with neighbors to identify areas where dark spots create a sense of insecurity or potential danger from poor visibility.

Policy: Support neighborhood groups and neighborhood activities.***Action: Create a Standing Neighborhoods Committee***

Create a city neighborhoods committee with representatives from each neighborhood and relevant city department staff to have a clear and ongoing means of communication between neighborhoods and the city.

Action: Provide Annual Support for Community-Driven Neighborhood Initiatives

Ensure that annual city community grants include competitive grants for neighborhoods to support special projects or community events such as a neighborhood block party.

Policy: Work to create stronger physical and social connections within and between neighborhoods.

Action: Combat Speeding in Neighborhoods

Employ a range of strategies to combat speeding in neighborhoods. In rural neighborhoods, this could include the use of speed cameras. In more urban neighborhoods, this could include traffic-calming treatments, “your speed is” signs, shifting streets to one-ways, stricter enforcement, and additional signage (speed, children at play, yield to pedestrian in crosswalk, etc.).

Action: Bike Path and Walking Connections

Prioritize safe routes between and within neighborhoods and jobs or essential services. This could include building the planned bike path through the Barbour Street connection, sidewalk improvements along Route 2, and maintenance enforcement to ensure those routes stay open year-round.

Action: Continue to Support Programs and Efforts to Create Broader Concept of Neighborhood

For several years, “neighborhoods” in the city referred to affordable housing developments. The new boundaries delineate neighborhoods, of which the developments are one part. This will be supported by creating opportunities for interaction between neighbors of these larger areas, including clean-ups, neighborhood watch, and block parties.

Policy: Ensure each neighborhood has quality local recreation options and easy connections to city- or regional-scale amenities.

Action: Focus Project Priorities on Increasing Variety and Balancing Supply of Recreation Options Across Neighborhoods

Develop a framework for monitoring and prioritizing community recreation options across neighborhoods. This could include classifying types (trails, bike path, pocket parks, community parks, etc.) and inventorying for each neighborhood. Condition issues and new projects could then be considered against this list to focus on adding options and ensuring that those options are improving level of service to each neighborhood in a way that is context and population appropriate (supply versus demand but also age demographics of different portions of the city).

See also Parks and Open Space section and the City’s Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP).