One by one

Syracuse Urban Renewal Agency takes on vacant housing in Syracuse

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In Syracuse, projects labeled “urban renewal” have garnered a reputation, and it isn’t a good one.

But after four decades of relative dormancy, the Syracuse Urban Renewal Agency is energized to tackle one of the most blighted areas of the city, one vacant, uninhabitable or tax delinquent property at a time.

In December, SURA established an urban renewal plan, a significant step toward speeding and simplifying the process of reselling vacant lots and deteriorating buildings to developers.

“What we’re trying to do now is use this agency as a tool to vet developers that want to develop seizable and vacant properties,” said Katelyn Wright, a land use planner with the Department of Neighborhood and Business Development.

The repurposing of SURA -- an agency whose reputation in Syracuse is less than gleaming -- with a comprehensive, long-term plan is huge.

But it will be slow going to clean city properties, one by one, using an agency many Syracuse residents distrust.

A disjointed history

The Syracuse Urban Renewal Agency was formed in 1962, a requirement to access new urban renewal funding through the federal government; when the funds dried up in the late 70s, SURA became more or less inactive.

But for a span of about 15 years, projects listed under SURA razed historic landmarks, built a concrete barrier through the heart of the city, destroyed entire neighborhoods and displaced their residents.

Still, the program was responsible for some great developments, pointed out Dennis Connors, curator of history at the Onondaga Historical Association.

The Everson Museum of Art, originally planned as the Syracuse Museum of Fine Arts, was created largely through urban renewal efforts, Connors said.

On the other hand, SURA is widely considered responsible for wiping out the 15th Ward, demolishing historic Clinton Square and starting projects it couldn’t afford to finish.

Around the mid-1970s, Connors said, there was a shift toward rehabilitating historic buildings and districts.

“There was kind of, like, this ‘aha moment’ and they realized, ‘well, we don’t have to just tear something down and hope something gets built there’,”

Hanover Square, Syracuse’s first historic district, is a product of SURA and the urban renewal efforts, Connors said.

But not long after that, federal funding dried up and “urban renewal” as a technique was replaced by “community development,” Connors said, and SURA went dormant.

Re-renewal

But after 30 years, SURA is back in action, a big way.

Last December, the Common Council approved the agency’s new urban renewal plan outlining areas of the city designated as the most blighted neighborhoods, and setting up a framework for how SURA would be able to put seizable properties into the hands of developers with the means and intentions of improving them.

“Rather than execute urban renewal plans that involve mega-infrastructure projects, we’re trying to tailor it to address our vacant housing,” said Paul Driscoll, commissioner of neighborhood and business development and the only non-voting member of the SURA board.

Why? The bottom line, Driscoll said, is that state law sets very constricting limits on how cities can legally convey property ownership to new owners.

Which, in many cases, is a good thing -- a city couldn’t, for example, seize your home solely for the sake of building a new interstate highway on your land.

But with 1,647 vacant buildings in Syracuse, finding a more efficient way to turn...
those properties around has become a priority.

And while SURA is governed by a board comprised of the mayor, Common Council president, commissioner of finance, and commissioner of business and neighborhood development, the agency is a separate entity from the city government and operates under different restrictions.

Driscoll described SURA as a sort of purgatory into which vacant, tax delinquent or underutilized properties can be inventoried until a developer proposes a new plan for the property.

Driscoll said SURA, unlike the city, is granted two specific authorities by state law that will make it an effective tool for rehabilitating Syracuse's vacant housing.

First, the agency can sell properties for below their assessed value.

Which means SURA can establish a selling price for a property that takes into account the amount of money the new owner would put into the building to bring it up to code or make it inhabitable, Driscoll said.

Second, SURA is required to include a clause that holds new owners to executing the plans they agree to prior to the sale.

If a new owner agrees to bring a property up to code within a year of the sale, and they fail to do so, SURA has the authority to take ownership of that property, Driscoll said.

"Would we? Probably not, but it builds in flexibility that general municipal law doesn't have," he said.

Driscoll also noted that SURA has the power of eminent domain.

"That's a tool in the toolbox, but we have no intention of using it," he said.

Slow and steady

But the process is slow: since Jan. 1, when SURA's plan became effective and their new mission launched, no properties have been seized.

Partly, Driscoll said, because there's a long process of notifying property owners -- twice -- that their property is tax delinquent and will be seized.

"We have roughly 20 properties in the pipeline, but most of them are in that waiting period," he said.

It's not all red tape, though.

"We're purposely moving slowly on this," Driscoll said. "This is a new thing for the city and a new thing for SURA. SURA will be depending on the city to help maintain these properties when they fall into SURA inventory; we don't want to get overwhelmed."

Driscoll said the goal is to seize fewer than 50 properties by the end of the year.

Katelyn Wright, a land use developer in the Department of Neighborhood and Business Development, was aware of the reputation SURA has in the city.

"One thing that is a challenge is we're operating with this name that is kind of loaded," she said.

Wright pointed out another obstacle:

"Seventy-five percent of seizable properties in the city are not vacant," Wright said. Many of them are not owner-occupied, which means seizing those buildings would be putting tenants -- renters not responsible for paying the taxes -- out of a home.

"That's a situation we're feeling out very carefully," Wright said. She said a program is being set up to help relocate tenants in unfit buildings.

"It's not something we've done yet but we realize it is a scenario we're going to run into," she added.

To view the list of seizable buildings and vacant lots within the SURA boundaries, or a map of the designated SURA area, visit theeaglecn.com.