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Another $1 million in property demolition coming to Atlantic City

MICHELLE BRUNETTI POST Staff Writer

ATLANTIC CITY — The Casino Reinvestment Development Authority is putting another $1 million toward demolition of dilapidated properties by city government, part of a continuing effort to address blight in the resort.

After decades of casino gambling, blight remains a huge problem. Twenty-three percent of the resort's housing is vacant, according to the Census Bureau, compared with 11% statewide. And residents routinely ask for help getting rid of eyesores and forcing property owners to clean up their properties.

The board voted at its October meeting to provide an additional $1 million to the city, bringing its investment in city demolition over several years to more than $6.15 million, CRDA Executive Director Matt Doherty said.

About $4 million of that has been used in the tourism district.

"The most famous demo was the 'alligator motel' on Route 40," Doherty said of the former Bayview Inn, vacant since a 2017 raid where authorities recovered drugs, weapons and an abandoned alligator in the motel's swimming pool. "But a lot of demos done in the city have been small houses and properties."

Bayview was demolished earlier this year at a cost of about $250,000.

Lance Landgraf, director of planning and development at CRDA, said the city has not provided a list of which properties it will remove with the funds.

He estimated the city can demolish about 67 properties with $1 million, based on prior data.

"Properties haven't been identified as of yet," said Mayor Marty Small. "Strategically we are going to try to get the best bang for our buck. We're just glad we got the funds to continue our mission to remove any and all eyesores from the City of Atlantic City."

Landgraf added: "This is a very good project to help bring back neighborhoods. Dilapidation brings down neighborhoods. You pull down buildings, and it brings a fresh start."

But Sean Reardon, a real estate investor in the city who is running for City Council in the 4th Ward, said the city needs to have a plan for what to do with all of the empty lots that are left after demos.

"I'm definitely all for properties in the city coming down that need to come down," Reardon said. "But I don't want to see us just tear down because the entire city has blocks that have been vacant for decades. That can be an eyesore as well."

Michael Johnson of the Venice Park Civic Association, who has led a committee to evaluate vacant homes in his neighborhood and come up with a plan to help either remove them or rehabilitate them, said he is hopeful some of the new funds will be used there.

“We had 14 houses in Venice Park (in need of demo) from our perspective,” Johnson said. “But professionals might add to that number or subtract from it.”

It may be more cost effective to demolish some homes that might be salvageable by some measures, he said, and build new.

“If it takes $80,000, but rules say you have to elevate it, that adds more money to it,” Johnson said. “That has to be figured out.”

The city has been attempting to deal with the problem of neighborhood blight, and has made some inroads. The Inlet area was transformed with new townhomes; and the gateway to the city off the Atlantic City Expressway is now a popular shopping center called The Walk. That area for years was dominated by an old and problematic public housing complex.

But the city’s efforts have been complicated by the effects of a national recession, Superstorm Sandy, the casino closings of 2014, the city’s continuing financial problems and deepening poverty. The city’s poverty rate increased from 22.5% in 1969 to 37.6% in 2016, while the state poverty rate has remained relatively stable, moving from 8.1% to 10.4%.

Seven years after Sandy, Councilman William “Speedy” Marsh said the city has a housing initiative to remove damaged homes that cannot be rehabbed, many of which were virtually destroyed in that historic storm.

“This is absolutely a necessity,” Marsh said.