

Robert J. Cook

2021 JAN 11 P 1:57

MICROSOFT "TEAMS"
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT COMMITTEE

TOWN CLERK
EAST HARTFORD

JANUARY 6, 2021

PRESENT Don Bell, Chair and Councillor Angie Parkinson

ABSENT Councillor Patricia Harmon and EHHA Board of Commissioners Chair Jim Kate

ALSO Marcia Leclerc, Mayor

PRESENT Eileen Buckheit, Development Director
Saud Anwar, Vice Chair, Housing Committee; Connecticut General Assembly
Esther Clarke, Town Council Minority Leader
Rich Kehoe, Town Council Chair

CALL TO ORDER

Chair Bell called the meeting to order at 6:06 p.m.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

December 3, 2020

MOTION By Angie Parkinson
seconded by Don Bell
to **approve** the minutes of the December 3, 2020 Community Engagement Committee meeting.
Motion carried 2/0.

OPPORTUNITY FOR RESIDENTS TO SPEAK

None

NEW BUSINESS

Improving the Quality of Affordable Housing in East Hartford

Mayor Leclerc and Eileen Buckheit, Development Director discussed the following issues with the Committee:

- The town is not in the business of housing, but we do use the court system, CDBG funds, and the like to help when necessary.

- Recent ordinances established a program (not fully operable yet due to Covid-19) for renters whereby any landlord must go through a review process by the Inspections & Permits Department whenever they are between tenants. This will help people who are renting properties that are substandard.
- Going after blighted properties, acquiring and demolishing them. The court system takes a long time, but eventually it works
- The town has many properties that are not owner-occupied, and these often need attention/monitoring
- Mayor Leclerc stated that the East Hartford Housing Authority does a good job of maintaining their properties. She based this on her experiences with residents and on visiting these properties over time. Veteran's Terrace is also in the process of being renovated.
- **CDBG Housing Rehabilitation Program:**
 - Partnership for Strong Communities:
 - total units: 21,300
 - 53% owner-occupied (just below Hartford county average...60%)
 - 54% single-family, detached (and the trend lately, perhaps due to Covid-19, is for people to lease rather than buy)
 - 620 mobile homes
 - 9% 3-4 families
 - 16% affordable - we exceed State of Connecticut requirements
 - 3490 units – with a waiting list for occupancy
 - Aging housing stock – most was built before 1950. Much of it is not in good condition. There's a 90-day mandatory waiting period to demolish a home that's 50+ years old
 - Building permits for new housing - only 3 in recent years, so we don't have "churn" = housing going down, and back up
 - Housing wage is low: \$23.55 (hourly wage that's needed to live there), around \$70,000 for a family of 4
 - Affordable = 30% of your income
- **CDBG Block Grant funds** - we have some for housing rehab
 - Paul O'Sullivan, Grants Administrator, deals with these
 - criteria are sometimes restrictive:
 - 0% loan that's paid back when the property is sold
 - You apply by income level - combined income of all in home must be below 80% of AMI (area median income)
 - No more than 2 active liens on property
 - No outstanding taxes or violations open with the town
 - About 40% of those who apply typically get these
 - There's one for rentals, but they must be owner-occupied
 - Sept 2018-Aug 2019 – East Hartford processed a total of 12 projects, loaning out a total of \$282k (one year it was \$120k, and it does vary)
 - Often these are the larger projects that are more costly and most people struggle to afford, such as roofs (7), furnaces/boilers (5), plumbing, chimney repair, electric work, ADA compliance for front porches (especially in multifamily homes)
 - The town avoids window replacement –when possible – due to the fact that it often involves lead paint abatement, which is extremely costly and depletes funding.

- Senator Saud Anwar, Vice Chair of the Housing Committee spoke on the following:
 - **T-RAP program** - state rental assistance program
 - They've increased the funding from \$10M to \$40M
 - Much of it this year's funding has been depleted due to Covid-19, and CARES Act money ran out on December 30, 2020.
 - CARES Act 2 will be \$200M+.
 - Used for housing related issues, including rental assistance and assistance with utility bills (even retroactive)
 - February 9, 2021 – Executive orders declaring public health emergency expire on this date. If not renewed, the town needs to devise a plan or enact legislation, similar to what the State of New York just authorized, to prevent foreclosures.
 - Senator Anwar is working on a 2nd bill called **EMAP (emergency mortgage assistance program)** - money comes from CHFA, to help landlords of smaller rentals avoid foreclosure
 - Mayor Leclerc is concerned that they may just keep the money and not fix up the housing, letting it fall into disrepair. We need to incentivize owners to improve their properties, or at least keep them up.
 - Rich Kehoe, Town Council Chair suggested that a requirement should be affixed to the program, such as an inspection of the property to ensure that the building is up to code and not in disrepair.
 - Senator Anwar is also working on a **Workforce Housing Bill with Opportunity Zones** – the State should have the same opportunities as the individual who invests a great deal of money into Opportunity Zones. The town can also offer state tax breaks in this program.
 - Municipalities can offer certain people these breaks first - teachers, firefighters, etc. to incentivize them to live in town
 - A-30G says that 10% of housing should be "affordable". East Hartford is very compliant with the affordability of its housing stock, but other towns are not. Senator Anwar is working on a bill that would give a neighboring town's housing authority the right to claim jurisdiction on properties if that town is not taking care of their share and can start making affordable housing there.
 - Another bill the Senator is working on will require out-of-state investors to have a local, in-state management company to address issues with regard to their housing. Therefore, there is more accountability.
 - Another bill - increases liability when poor housing conditions impact people's health

Questions & Answers

Don Bell: Is there any wiggle room with the CDBG program, or is it all Federal?

- Eileen Buckheit: Not really. We are dealing with Housing & Urban Development.

Don Bell: Is data collected about race when people apply for CDBG grants?

- Eileen Buckheit: yes.

Don Bell: Is information about these programs being navigated to particular communities?

- Eileen Buckheit: we have done a focus on one neighborhood on Silver Lane (identified when we were doing Working Cities as a place that needed attention), and she thinks it went well. There has been a discussion of doing it in Mayberry Village, maybe doing a mailer, etc.
- Mayor: these grants are only for owner-occupied units, and there aren't enough of those

Don Bell: Can people buy homes, tear them down, and build new ones?

- That would be great, but most people cannot afford to do that. It is a rare occurrence in distressed municipalities.
- Also, most of East Hartford is "built-out" meaning there just isn't plenty of developable space available anymore. That is one of the reasons for focusing on new housing stock at the old Showcase Cinema property.

Don Bell: Are there mechanisms that we have or could implement that can make absentee landlords more hands-on?

- Once the program comes online where they have to register with the town, that should help
- If it's really bad, we'll have to use the stick: blight enforcement

Don Bell: Mayor, how do we use the courts to help with housing?

- Mayor: "long, painful, ridiculous". Violators are given chance after chance, and they can challenge the decisions repeatedly, so it takes forever. Now that the courts shut down due to Covid-19, we have lost a year.

Angie Parkinson: What do you think about tax breaks to incentivize owners to occupy their units?

- In 2013, the Mayor sent the "Improving East Hartford" program to the Tax Policy Committee, but it was never approved. Any improvements could be tax exempt as long as they increase the value of the property. However, it won't include windows, etc. And basics like that is what people need before they can consider cosmetic changes.
- Any program would be labor intensive - the labor, record-keeping, etc. for the town to do something like this would be prohibitive
- Rich Kehoe: assessed value assumes everything is in good shape. Your place isn't worth less b/c the roof is run down. He says the real problems are lack of money and lack of caring...and a stingy federal government that needs to loosen requirements for helpful programs. We have the mechanism with our blight ordinance, it's just about the resources it takes to do it all.

Angie Parkinson: Do we have funding or grants set aside to try to purchase properties so we can resell them...just to get them moving?

- Mayor: if the property is blighted, the town can lien it or try to demolish it. Some owners won't give up the property. Therefore the mortgage company could be contacted, and once they see that it's blighted, they might decide to pull out. But that also is extremely time consuming.

ADJOURNMENT

MOTION By Angie Parkinson
 seconded by Don Bell
 to **adjourn** at 7:34 p.m.
 Motion carried 2/0.

C: Town Council
 Marcia Leclerc, Mayor
 Eileen Buckheit, Development Director
 Saud Anwar, Chair, Housing Committee; Connecticut General Assembly