Neighborhood Services Presentation

September 22, 2020

Jerry Heinline: Building Official

Patrick Saunders: Neighborhood Services Coordinator
In September of 2016, I was directed by the town manager to identify buildings in town that:

- Had been vacant for more than one year and any combination of:
1. Met the definition of a “blighted property” per state code section 36-3.
2.Disconnected from water or electrical utilities or both.
4. Outstanding taxes or other fees.
5. Vacant and open for public entry.
6. Unsafe structure as defined in the Virginia Maintenance Code.
7. Is an obvious nuisance to the neighborhood.
8. Had multiple nuisance code violations.
DEFINITIONS:

**Blighted property**: Means any individual commercial, industrial, or residential structure or improvement that endangers the public's health, safety, or welfare because the structure or improvement upon the property is dilapidated, deteriorated, or violates minimum health and safety standards.

**UNSAFE STRUCTURE**: An existing structure (i) determined by the code official to be dangerous to the health, safety and welfare of the occupants of the structure or the public; (ii) that contains unsafe equipment; or (iii) that is so damaged, decayed, dilapidated, structurally unsafe or of such faulty construction or unstable foundation that partial or complete collapse is likely. A vacant existing structure unsecured or open shall be deemed to be an unsafe structure.
➢ If the building was vacant for more than one year but otherwise was being maintained on the exterior it did not make the list.

➢ We can not force people to live in or rent out a building.

➢ However, the building must be maintained as to not pose a blight on a property or the neighborhood and must meet the requirements of the Virginia Maintenance Code and be maintained to meet local nuisance ordinances.

➢ If someone wants to secure there home by simply ensuring the doors are locked and the windows are secured that is a property owners right.

➢ If property owner chooses to vacate a building and board it up that is there right. Again, the exterior must be maintained.
**301.3 Vacant Structures: “Vacant structures shall be maintained in a clean, safe, secure, and sanitary condition as provided for in this code.”**
Authority To Enforce

State Law reference—Authority of Town to require removal, repair, etc., of buildings and other structures, Code of Virginia, § 15.2-906; power of Town to regulate the building of houses, Code of Virginia, § 36-99; repair or other abatement of dangerous buildings, etc., Code of Virginia, § 15.2-1115; power of Town to regulate the light, ventilation, sanitation, use and occupancy of buildings, Code of Virginia, § 15.2-1117; limitation of prosecutions of Building Code violations, Code of Virginia, § 19.2-8; Virginia Industrialized Building Safety Law, Code of Virginia, § 36-70 et seq.; Uniform Statewide Building Code, Code of Virginia, § 36-97
➢ In January of 2017 eleven (11) buildings were identified that met the criteria as set forth.

➢ In 2017 six (6) of the buildings were demolished.

➢ In 2018 three (3) more were demolished.

➢ In 2019 the final two (2) were demolished.
1. 115 White Pine Drive
2. 2140 Hammes Street
3. 650 Agee Street
4. 15 Depot Street
5. 203 Third Street
6. 345 West Street
7. 1135 Radford Street
8. 405 Depot Street
9. 650 Harless Street
10. 335 Depot Street
11. 2735 Roanoke Street
Since completion of the original eleven (11) buildings four (4) more have been demolished.

850 North Franklin Street
525 Stone Street
1175 Moose Drive
470 Depot Street
Since 2012, 32 unsafe or blighted, vacant buildings have been demolished.
Neighborhood blight and the presence of vacant and abandoned properties have profound negative impacts on afflicted communities. Blighted properties decrease surrounding property values, erode the health of local housing markets, pose safety hazards, and reduce local tax revenue.
115 White Pine Drive
203 Third Street
405 Depot Street
650 Harless Street
335 Depot Street
3275 Roanoke Street
525 Stone Street
1175 Moose Drive
1175 Moose Drive
470 Depot Street
Neighborhood Services

Neighborhood Services Coordinator: Patrick Saunders
Mission Statement

The mission of the Neighborhood Services Division is to protect the health, safety and welfare of the Town of Christiansburg and to enhance the appearance of neighborhoods and business districts to prevent blight, protect property values and enhance economic conditions. It is our goal to obtain voluntarily compliance, whenever possible, by administering a fair and unbiased enforcement program.
Goals and Objectives

• To make the Town of Christiansburg a clean and safe place to live, through a cooperative effort between the community and the Town.

• To provide courteous, prompt and professional service.

• To gain voluntary compliance.

• Encourage personal responsibility related to property maintenance.

• Foster and promote relationships with community organizations.
Goals and Objectives

- Help organize city-wide clean-ups and other community oriented projects
- Educate the citizens as to the benefits of code enforcement
- Be a resource to the community
- Strive to always achieve voluntary compliance!
ENCOURAGE COMMUNITY PRIDE!
How Are Complaints Received?

- On-line complaint form
- Email
- Telephone
- Staff
- Proactive enforcement
- Based on history of citizen complaints we have focused on 4 violation types.

1. Tall Grass
2. Junk and Debris
3. Inoperable Vehicles
4. Blighted Buildings

* Property maintenance predominantly still driven by tenant complaints with the exception being blighted buildings*
Case Status: March 31, 2020-September 22, 2020

- Complied: 235
- Closed: 86
- Open: 65
Since March 31 - today, Neighborhood Services has had a total of 391 cases.

82 Percent have been complied or closed.

Same time period last year there were 149 total cases.

The increase is due to the proactive approach the town has implemented.

While working a complaint often several other properties are noticed that have same or other violations.
Enforcement Process

- Phone call or in person visit (This is not a notice of violation)
- Letter to the property owner
- Provide reasonable time to correct violation (In many cases more time is allowed than town code stipulates)
- If not corrected as required or agreed to, a formal violation notice is issued.
- If violation is not corrected in the time period stipulated legal action may be pursued.
Typical Enforcement Time Period (Days)

- Tall Grass: 10
- Junk and Debris: 10 (longer if excessive)
- Inoperable Cars: 10 (longer depending on amount of vehicles)
- Property Maintenance: 10-20 (longer if not safety hazard)
Cases involving nuisance type violations average eight (8) days until they are complied with or closed out.

Unsafe structures, blighted buildings and multiple inoperable cars typically take longer to gain compliance.

Some unsafe or blighted structure cases have taken 5+ years.
Why So Long?

- Property has sentimental value to the owner(s).
- Foreclosure processes.
- Owner lives out of town.
- No contact for the owner.
- Property is in probate court.
- No one likes to be told to tear down personal property.
- Town staff prefers to work with citizens and not rely on the court system. A judgement in court is no good if the person already can’t comply with the violation notice.
Most property owners that have a property in violation of a code or ordinance is typically not that they want to be in violation, but rather physical impairments, financial well being, or mental illness greatly contributes to the property being in violation.

Others feel it’s their personal property and should be allowed to do with as they choose. I generally agree with that sentiment. However, if a property begins to affect the safety, well being, property value, or generally brings down the overall appearance of a neighborhood, the town has codes that were enacted to prevent this.
Difficult Cases

- **Blighted buildings**: Often the responsible party lacks the resources to comply with the violation notice or has emotional attachment to the property.

- **Line of sight complaints**: Typically originate from a citizen complaint. Staff has to verify the specific site conditions.

- **Tenant Complaints**: Often involve disputes as to unpaid rent. We tend to be used as a tool for tenants to get out of a lease but do get legit complaints were landlords do not meet their responsibilities in regards to maintenance.

- **Absentee Property Owners**: Property owners whom are out of the area and are difficult to contact. Letters often are ignored, certified notices go unsigned for and phone numbers are changed.

- **Garbage Carts**: These cases are very, very time consuming specifically in townhome communities.

- **SAFETY**: Threats of being physically harmed personally or having your family harmed. NO JOKE THIS HAPPENS!
Dear Property Owner(s):

On behalf of the Town of Christiansburg, we extend our appreciation and sincerest gratitude for your efforts to comply with case number (0000). The Town has a responsibility to assure that ordinances enacted for the health, safety and welfare are followed by property owners and strive to maintain a positive general appearance of the Town.

If we can be of any assistance, please do not hesitate to contact us. Again, thank you for your cooperation, understanding and efforts in assisting us with this matter.

Respectfully,
Secured housing for an citizen whom would have been otherwise homeless.

Through personal friends removed junk and debris for two elderly citizens who otherwise could not comply with the case.

Commercial property with over 800 tires onsite. In less than two weeks tires were removed from the site.
Projects

➢ New handout being developed to educate citizens as to what constitutes a violation.
➢ Clean up day to coordinate with fall and spring cleanup each year.
➢ Partner with the “BIG EVENT” annually.
➢ Development of the Neighborhood Services webpage.
➢ Find funds if available, to assist those in need of maintenance to their properties.
Today Patrick Saunders stopped by and introduced himself as the Neighborhood Services Coordinator and I really appreciate it.

It's nice to know if we need some help he's there to help us out. I love the Town of Christiansburg and I thank you very much. I think this position is great and I thank Patrick Saunders for stopping by.
I noticed you all have hired a code enforcer to have people mow their yards and things of that nature and I want to tell you that is one of the best positions I think you all hired so far.

I can see an improvement in our community and the neighborhood. There are people that haven’t mowed their grass in weeks, months, and that’s not an exaggeration and I see now that they are.

I want to let you know that I’m sure you are probably getting a lot of grief from some people but I'm one that greatly appreciates you having someone fill that position and actually enforce it. I hope and pray that the town will actually stand behind somebody that is out here doing a job that well and that good and at the end of the day, we all want a nice neighborhood and nice home so they value will go up and not down.
I have been a resident of Christiansburg for over thirty years. Within the past four or five months, I’ve seen a lot of positive changes that have improved the appearance of our town and enhanced property values. In particular, I’ve noticed a lot of old structures have been taken down in both business and residential areas. Also, a lot of junk that created eyesores in our town has been eliminated.

Please let the department (and employees) responsible for these work projects know they are appreciated. Keep up the good work!
Email: July 28, 2020

I am writing in recognition of an employee with the Town of Christiansburg.

For the past 6 summers, I have been trying to get the empty lot beside me cleaned up. It has been a nuisance to the neighborhood. Fallen trees have blocked the road, damaged my fence and house. Also, large weeds, poison ivy, has grown through the fence onto my property.

It is for this reason I write. In two weeks, Mr. Patrick Saunders was able to contact the business owner and coordinate clearing of this lot. The crew today did an amazing job. I want to recognize a job well done.

Sincerely,
Common Myths About Neighborhood Services

- You will be fined for having window screen missing.
- Town staff rides around looking for missing window screens.
- Town staff singles out certain citizens.
- Town staff picks and chooses cases they investigate.
- Town staff issue fines in order to increase revenue.
- Staff does not like me and has singled me out.
THANK YOU!