

City Council Seeks Tools To Fight Blight

Staff Asked To Create New Ordinance

By **PRESTON KNIGHT**

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HARRISONBURG — City Council Tuesday night directed staff to create a proposed ordinance addressing blighted properties.

Mayor Richard Baugh said nuisance provisions in city code work in most cases where a property poses public safety issues. But an ordinance that sets specific guidelines to eradicate blight, such as requiring a homeowner to submit an improvement plan, would give the city more power to take over houses if improvements are not made.

State law defines a blighted property as one that endangers the public's health, safety or welfare because a structure is dilapidated, deteriorated or violates minimum health and safety standards.

Baugh said he can “count on one hand” the number of buildings in Harrisonburg that would fall under such a definition.

Council members did not mention any sites specifically Tuesday, but they and the Northeast Neighborhood Association have discussed blight causing decreased property values and increasing criminal activity in that neighborhood.

Councilman David Wiens calls it a “long-suffering community issue.”

City attorney Earl Thumma Jr. and Assistant City Manager Anne Lewis will work on an ordinance to present to council in the coming months so, if one is adopted, it can take effect before the next fiscal year.

One option is to send notices to a property owner that a site is blighted, which would then trigger a 30-day time frame for a written plan of corrective action to be submitted. If that plan is not received, the city could officially declare the property as blighted and place a lien on the property or repair it, and then recoup costs from the owner.

Thumma warned council members to be aware of the potential costs of repairing blight.

“If you can't get a person to do something,” he said, “you've got to have the money to do it yourself. Once you reach a certain point, everything is going to stop if you don't have the money to go forward.”

Lewis mentioned one tactic that appears to work in Lynchburg: public shaming. Officials there place signs with the property owner's name and address — all public information — in the city's right of way in front of dilapidated buildings, she said.

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