

Abandoned buildings meet their demise

'Eyesore' houses demolished, mayor says new housing to be built

By Chris Sykes Staff Writer, Orange Transcript

City residents who have complained about the dilapidated condition of several residences throughout Orange should be happy to know the city has begun demolishing them in time for Christmas.

On Monday morning, city officials over saw the demolition of two blighted buildings at Henry and Day streets. Starting at 9 a.m., work crews got to the business of getting rid of the eyesores, which Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr. said was the start of something good toward Orange's future.

"Earlier this year, in July, a new owner, South Day Henry Realty Associates LLC, purchased the properties which had been ordered demolished by the city," said Hawkins in a statement. "Since the purchase, the new owners have removed debris and cleaned up the properties and they have secured CCI Construction to demolish the properties and are developing plans to redevelop the parcel."

Monday's demolitions, as spectacular as they were for local residents, were a continuation of actions that had begun last week along Lincoln Avenue.

Hawkins led a ribbon-cutting ceremony Dec. 14 for a new two-family house at 209 Lincoln Ave., across from the soon-to-reopen Lincoln Avenue School. The school has been renovated and expanded; the house replaces one which had been damaged in a fire and only partially repaired.

Hawkins said the Orange Department of Planning and Community Development worked with the property's new owner, Michelangelo Forgione, to demolish the old building and build a new house.

"The house is a beautiful, two-family rental unit with two bedrooms in each unit," said Valerie Jackson, the department's director. An earlier work by Forgione's Orange business, said Jackson, has been rented by an employee of the Orange Fire Department. With that in mind, Hawkins said it was only right that, last week during the ribbon-cutting ceremony, the unnamed employee was with Jackson, Forgione and other planning department employees.

"Our Quality of Life Task Force continues to rid the city of Orange of problem properties and to demolish unsafe structures," said Hawkins. "Our planning and development department works with the property owners to redevelop the sites. The wonderful new house at 209 Lincoln Ave. is an example of what the city can accomplish working with a public spirited developer."

All of that cooperation and planning, Hawkins said, bodes well for the continued future redevelopment of Orange. His goal, said Hawkins, is to have the city become a great place to live and work, as well as a destination for visitors, shoppers, diners and others to come to and spend their time, money and other resources.

One of the keys to making that plan come to fruition, Hawkins said, is to get rid of the eyesores that have a history of distracting from Orange's traditional small-time charms and its big-city aspirations.

Additionally, with experience gained through his position as a West Orange police officer, Hawkins said it is well known among city residents that empty, abandoned and unused buildings provide unsafe havens for criminals to find out-of-the-way yet easily accessible locations for their illegal activities. That issue was discussed by At Large Councilman Rayfield Morton during the City Council's meeting on Dec. 1. He also raised the specter of abandoned, blighted buildings as potential fire and death traps.

"These same people who don't have anything to eat don't have any place to live. They stay in abandoned buildings in town and they try to stay warm in the winter, so they start fires and it gets out of control," said Morton.

"It's not fair," Morton continued. "If we have situations where people are breaking in, we have to keep them out of these empty houses because we need to protect the people living next door or in close proximity to some of these abandoned buildings."

For some residents, the proof of their complaints about empty, abandoned blighted buildings came through the tragic circumstances of Detective Kieran Shields' death.

Shields was killed by Raynard Brown in August 2006, after he and his partner responded to a seemingly abandoned, blighted building on Taylor Street to investigate a reported disturbance, possibly involving gunshots. Shields encountered Brown, who shot him in the neck. Those gunshots caused wounds that led to Shields' death.

Both Hawkins and police Director John Rappaport said the answer to the question of how to prevent another tragedy like Shields' from happening in Orange again is to rid the city of old, abandoned and blighted buildings.

"After the demolitions at Henry and Day, we're going to seek to have the properties redeveloped in keeping with the scale and appearance of the neighborhood," said Hawkins.