

# Blight fight



## [Show caption](#)

Advocate staff photo by ARTHUR D. LAUCK -- East Baton Rouge Parish officials are considering new measures to help deal more effectively with the problem of blight, such as this dilapidated house in the 200 block of West Johnson Street in Old South Baton Rouge.

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## Parish considering measures to ease foreclosure on neglected properties

**BY FAIMON A. ROBERTS III**

*Advocate staff writer*

East Baton Rouge Parish officials are considering strict new anti-blight measures that would make it easier for the city-parish to foreclose on neglected or abandoned property.

The city-parish would be able under the new plan to foreclose on a property if the owner fails to pay liens placed on the property by the city-parish, said David Guillory, interim director of the Department of Public Works.

Such liens, known as “nuisance liens,” are attached to a property when DPW crews have to do work, such as mowing the grass, to take care of a private property, Guillory said.

Currently, the city-parish can only foreclose on a property for nonpayment of taxes, Guillory said.

One of the hoped-for benefits of the new plan is a reduction of blight and crime in certain areas, such as the 70805 ZIP code, where the city-parish has launched the Baton Rouge Violence Elimination project. The 70805 ZIP code, which is generally bordered by Airline Highway to the north and east, Choctaw Drive to the south and the Mississippi River to the west, has been targeted by BRAVE because of the high number of homicides in the area.

“We have asked for the city police’s input on some of the areas we are looking to target,” Guillory said. “The city police are actually at the table with us” discussing the new measures, he said.

“Many of these condemnations are in those areas and it just breeds drug activity and anything else,” Guillory said.

The East Baton Rouge Redevelopment Authority is assisting the city-parish in crafting the plan, which will require the adoption of new city-parish ordinances, said Mark Goodson, the RDA’s chief operating officer.

In addition, the city-parish will have to seek an amendment to a state law that prohibits municipalities with populations under 300,000 from foreclosing on property for nonpayment of liens, Goodson said.

Despite the legal hurdles, DPW’s Guillory said he is confident the new rules will be enacted.

“This is going to happen,” Guillory said. “I am not sure when or exactly what it will look like, but it will happen.”

Central to the plan, Guillory said, is changing the city’s code enforcement from one that reacts to complaints to one that actively seeks out building code violations.

“This will be a comprehensive code enforcement program that is not complaint driven,” Guillory said.

He said inspectors will be riding around actively looking for code violations rather than waiting for people to call in a complaint.

The city of Baton Rouge has three code enforcement officers, who respond to complaints routed through the city’s 311 system, Guillory said. But under new plan, he said, the city-parish “will probably going to have no less than 30 code enforcement officers.”

RDA President and Chief Executive Officer Walter Monsour said he hopes to present a plan to the Metro Council before the end of the year. However, he said, it would not be part of the 2013 city-parish budget, which is due to be presented to the Council on Nov. 5.

“It will be in a budget supplement,” Monsour said.

When asked how the city-parish planned to pay for the additional officers, Guillory said, “Well, the first 24 months, we don’t know yet. After that, the model will pay for itself.”

In other cities where similar plans have been enacted — such as Baltimore, Flint, Mich., and New Orleans — collections from fines and liens and the resale of foreclosed properties have made the programs profitable, Goodson said.

Such a switch would be a welcome change for the city-parish, which has been forced to devote several public works crews to work on abandoned and neglected properties, said William Daniel, chief administrative officer to Mayor-President Kip Holden.

That leaves fewer crews to perform other needed functions, such as cutting grass in public areas and road repairs, he said.

When DPW demolishes a building, it is often just the start of the city-parish’s expense, Daniel said.

“When we go knock down a house, (the owners) usually don’t really care and so what we are ending up doing is having to go back four times a year to cut the grass,” Daniel said. “We knock down a house, we knock down 10 houses and now we are mowing 10 yards four times a year,” he said.

“We really don’t have the budget for the whole blight issue,” Daniel said.

The city-parish has a revolving list of about 600-800 properties where it mows grass or performs other work keep the properties up to code, Guillory said. Some are tax adjudicated — meaning properties that the city-parish has control over because the owner did not pay taxes. Others are privately owned but neglected, he said.

Each time DPW mows the grass on a property, a lien is attached to that property. Some properties have accrued thousands of dollars in liens and fines, Guillory said.

The RDA’s Goodson stressed the goal of stricter enforcement is to encourage owners “to bring properties back into compliance with the code.” He said the purpose of the new plan is not to help the city-parish acquire more property.

Goodson said officials had seen how well the program worked in other cities.

The Baltimore program “has become a model nationally for code enforcement,” Goodson said.

The RDA has consulted with the nonprofit Center for Community Progress on the plan, Goodson said. The same organization has consulted with officials in New Orleans, he said.

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