



Ypsilanti to charge for vacant buildings

New ordinance aimed at fighting blight and ensuring safety

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The Ypsilanti City Council amended an ordinance Tuesday to crack down on vacant and dangerous buildings in the city and force owners to repair dilapidated properties.

The ordinance also includes a provision that could cost residents who leave their houses vacant for more than 12 months about \$115 in fees and a deposit even if their properties are well-maintained.

The council approved the ordinance 5-1. It will take effect this month.

Mayor Cheryl Farmer said vacant buildings constitute a blight in the city and the ordinance will give officials another tool to fight the blight. "It's a reasonable and rational response," she said.

The city has more than 100 residential and commercial buildings that are vacant, said Charles Boulard, the city's building director. The city has been maintaining these buildings and billing residents, but in some cases the city has not recovered the cost, he said. "The city is cleaning up after these owners," he said.

The ordinance will allow the city to recover the cost in case residents default on paying for mowing lawns or securing property. If a building is designated a dangerous structure and the city needs to demolish it, the city will use deposit money to remove it, Boulard said. The deposit money on dangerous buildings is \$300 a month.

Some residents supported part of the ordinance that pertained to fighting blight but disagreed with the empty building part.

Resident Joe Lawrence told the council that the provision will impact innocent landowners who take good care of their properties. Instead, the city ought to go after landlords with dilapidated property, he said.

The provision in question states that residents must register empty buildings with the city. If the property remains empty for 12 months, it will be considered a vacant structure and owners will have to pay the city \$65 a month for inspection and \$50 a month to be placed in escrow. After 180 days of being on the vacant-building list, the property is evaluated and could be placed on the dangerous-building list, increasing fees to \$365 a month.

Few properties, if any, will be affected by this provision, Boulard said. The city plans to go after dangerous buildings first, he said.

Council Member Trudy Swanson, D-1st Ward, who voted against the ordinance, said the city is understaffed and is unable to enforce existing ordinances.

Boulard said the city will monitor empty buildings if they trigger police and fire responses, code violations or complaints from residents.

Farmer said empty buildings can constitute blight because they attract trouble, where police and fire may get involved.

Assistant City Attorney John Gilbreath, who helped draft the ordinance, said the council and city residents have been concerned about vacant buildings for three years, and if the city were to remain idle, the buildings could become a safety concern. "I don't think it is over-reaching," he said.

Michael Lasive, director of fiscal policy at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a nonpartisan research and educational institution, disagrees. If public safety is not at risk and the property is maintained, the measure seems to be unnecessary, he said.

"Governments should not plan every facet of citizens' lives," Lasive said.

The council approved an earlier version of the ordinance two years ago, but the city has not enforced it, pending changes to address residents' concerns, such as changing the time period on the empty building designation from seven to 12 months.

Lawrence said the city took a pig and put lipstick on it and brought it back again. "It's still a pig," he said.

Farmer, council members Barry LaRue, D-3rd Ward, Brian Filipiak, D-3rd Ward, John Gawlas, D-2nd Ward, and William Nickels, D-2nd Ward, voted for the ordinance. Council Member Lois Richardson, D-1st Ward, was absent.

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