

In a recent editorial “Blighted? The homes may be but the people aren’t,” the Times-News sanctimoniously takes me to task for making some provocative comments about the City’s blight problem. The statements were made during the course of a wide-ranging discussion of our blighted property strategy at a recent City Council work-session.

On the one side were those who argued in favor of downgrading our nuisance enforcement efforts and re-doubling efforts in several of Cumberland’s most distressed areas. I argued that such a strategy is foolish and wasteful of our very limited financial resources and that we should enforce our nuisance/property codes and focus blight removal efforts in healthier neighborhoods. My reasons reflect some fairly elementary principles of urban planning that the Times-News either doesn’t know or doesn’t care to understand. So, let me spell them out:

(1) Public funds should be targeted in areas with the strongest housing markets. Simply put, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. It’s easier and far less expensive to nip a problem in the bud than it is to repair a massive problem that becomes circular and cumulative. Not only do you halt the spread of blight but if blight removal efforts do create vacant lots, chances are excellent that the parcels might be re-developed and expand the city tax base.

(2) Public funds should be concentrated rather than diffused. If blight removal is diffused throughout our worst hit neighborhoods, its effectiveness is doubly reduced because the removal of a handful of properties doesn’t even begin to address the real problem: entrenched systemic poverty that is only peripherally related to neighborhood housing quality. Without a more comprehensive strategy (and that requires many more resources than the City has at its disposal), even urban renewal won’t make the lives of these people any different. The people who lived there will have moved elsewhere and moved their problems with them.

(3) Enforcement efforts should fit the neighborhood. In healthy neighborhoods, blight begins as nuisance (trash, abandoned cars, high weeds, etc.). Nuisance becomes property degradation. Property degradation becomes serious blight. Therefore, nuisances should be particularly aggressively prosecuted in healthy neighborhoods. In poor neighborhoods systemic problems make strict code enforcement difficult because owners may abandon their property (thereby exacerbating blight) because they cannot afford the costs of repairing violations.

So in endorsing the view that nuisance properties be ‘handled differently’ (read ‘stop prosecuting them so harshly’) and that blighted properties ‘are not to be tolerated’ (period), the Times-News manages to get the equation completely wrong.

But, the mistakes don’t stop there. Amazingly, the Times-News disputes that some of our neighborhoods have ‘failed’ and that the city could be in such bad shape. I got news for the newspaper: some have and we are. With nearly half of our kids living in poverty (in some neighborhoods the figure approaches 100%), rock-bottom average household incomes, rising crime, an exodus of middle class residents, and an economic development strategy predicated on prisons and casinos, all I have to say is “where in the world have you been all these years?”

It is time for the Times-News to strike an independent and critical pose and stop being an ‘amen corner’ for bad public policy.