

S.D. mayor seeks tighter rules on abandoned homes

Recommendations aim to reduce blight

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San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders said yesterday that he is taking new steps to prevent home foreclosures and preserve neighborhoods by reducing blight from abandoned dwellings.

Sanders unveiled recommendations from an advisory panel to tighten regulations governing the maintenance of foreclosed homes. He also announced the creation of a Housing Commission Web site to help people facing foreclosure.

The mayor also noted that the city will use \$9.4 million in federal neighborhood stabilization funds to finance the purchase of foreclosed homes by first-time buyers and to buy, rehabilitate and rent out units in areas hard-hit by home loan failures.

Citing statistics from the county assessor's office, Sanders said the number of foreclosures in San Diego County last year increased 133 percent over 2007 to 19,577.

"While other areas have been hit harder by this crisis, far too many San Diego families have watched the dream of homeownership become a nightmare of financial turmoil," Sanders said during a morning news conference at the Community Housing Works Foreclosure Intervention Center in City Heights.

City Council members soon will consider recommendations from the mayor's Committee on Foreclosures and Neighborhood Stabilization to expand the Vacant Properties Program.

The program "gives city code compliance authority to enforce regulations regarding vacant properties," said Julie Dillon, co-chair of the committee.

The panel's recommendations were designed to improve the city's ability to hold property owners responsible for maintaining vacant homes, she said. Currently the program's focus is on "unsecured and boarded" structures. New language would give the city jurisdiction over "unoccupied and foreclosed" dwellings.

San Diego's Neighborhood Code Compliance Division responds to complaints about vacant properties that are public nuisances. The City Attorney's Office files legal actions against owners who ignore requests to maintain properties that are safety hazards or crime magnets.

Owners can be fined up to \$5,000 per structure each calendar year and may face criminal charges. The city can ask the court to impose remedies, including demolition, if a building is unsafe.

Few fines are issued by the city because the focus is on compliance, said Robert Vacchi, deputy director of development services for the city.

"The total neighborhood of fines last year was somewhere around \$3,000 to \$5,000," he said.

Vacchi said the proposed amendment has the potential to increase fines, but not greatly. Builder Sherm Harmer, who co-chairs the mayor's committee with Dillon, said the group reviewed neighboring Chula Vista's tough anti-blight ordinance, but decided that it was too punitive.

Chula Vista has taken a strong stance against lenders and loan servicers who allow vacant houses to become eyesores. Its blight measure has become a national model for communities struggling with rising foreclosure rates. Since its beginning in October 2007, the program has assessed \$1,371,192 in fines and collected \$720,382, officials said.

Sanders also said yesterday that he would support a recommendation from the advisory committee to work with the county to create a form that must be completed at the time foreclosures are recorded. It would include the names of parties responsible for maintaining foreclosed properties, along with contact information.

"This will provide content information for neighbors to be able to call and talk to a person, to report any lack of maintenance or questionable activities," Dillon said.

Sanders noted that the Housing Commission has launched foreclosuresandiego.org, a Web site designed to help educate and support distressed borrowers. He said the site has links to the nonprofit Housing Opportunities Collaborative, which is holding a series of free clinics for people facing foreclosure.

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