

War against blight targets county slumlords

Catching Schuylkill thieves

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When a slumlord allows a property to deteriorate, he lowers the value of all the neighboring properties - and that's the same as stealing.

"It can take 30 to 40 percent off the value of homes. That's what slumlords do in their communities," stated Jerry Stump, executive director, Pennsylvania House Urban Affairs Committee.

Stump spoke at a Tamaqua workshop held Wednesday in which officials from around Schuylkill County renewed their resolve to catch the slumlord criminals and obliterate blight along the way.

Stump spoke to 18 Tamaqua councilmen and representatives

from blight-stricken communities such as Girardville, Mahanoy City and Palo Alto.

Traditionally, he said, the Commonwealth viewed blight as a problem of cities like Philadelphia and Harrisburg. But now the state has come to realize that smaller urban areas like Tamaqua are impacted as well.

But, Stump says, there is light at the end of the tunnel in the form of bills soon to be introduced.

Perhaps the most promising is a bill that would allow municipalities to hit slumlords in the pocketbook.

"It's called private assessment attachment. If you own properties and you're in code violation or tax delinquency, then the municipality can deny

permits until the property is brought into compliance and taxes are paid," Stump explained.

The bill would utilize a computer registry and allow a municipality to go after the property owner's other assets, the ones making money.

However, Lori Bennick, Mahanoy City borough manager, pointed out that a few snags would still have to be ironed out before the idea would work, including the accuracy of records.

"The problem is that we run into fictitious names," Bennick reminded attendees.

Stump said another potential solution is in the form of a bill calling for creation of a mortgage guaranty corporation that

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Jerry Stump, executive director, Pennsylvania House Urban Affairs Committee, tells county officials in Tamaqua Wednesday that bills to address blight are expected to be introduced in Harrisburg. The legislation could go a long way toward stemming the problem of slumlords and dilapidated buildings, Stump said.

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would serve as a catalyst for investment.

"If we had a Commonwealth mortgage guaranty corporation to back up loans, instead of \$200,000 we'd put up \$1 million in risk capital and then you can start doing things. It's important in terms of leveraging private capital," Stump pointed out.

Bennick indicated that Schuylkill County, with its large number of row homes, is

in a unique situation.

"We have so many insurance companies that will not insure row homes, especially if one in the row is dilapidated," Bennick said.

But Tamaqua businessman Bruce Hess advised Stump and the group that it's not necessary to re-invent the wheel.

"The state has a guaranty insurance company. All that's needed is to expand their power to write residential (policies)," Hess indicated.

Other blight-prevention tools

the Commonwealth is looking at include a receivership bill that would permit a rehabilitator to manage a blighted property to bring it up to code and a private right of action bill to address zoning violations.

There is also discussion advocating a state income tax credit for residential property owners who rehabilitate their property.

Dan Grow Jr., Schuylkill County solid waste & demolition coordinator, said the problem of blight is especially

prevalent in coal region towns "where the population has been on the decline since the 1920s and 30s, when coal died out."

Grow said the highly successful county program has demolished 94 structures and refurbished 32 adjoining properties in the past three years at a total cost of \$1,266,000.

In Tamaqua alone, properties at 336-338 Hazle St., 254 Van Gelder St. and 101 E. Union St. were demolished last year at a cost of \$61,050.