

## Local Development



### LD-14

#### Encouraging home improvements

The city of Sterling Heights, Michigan (124,000), wants to encourage residents to maintain their homes. Because homes often start needing repairs once they are 10 years old, the city offers discounts on permits for repairs on homes that are 10 years old or older. The city council has also adopted the latest property maintenance standards and takes a proactive approach to enforcing these standards.

#### Implementation notes

**Leadership/staffing** The city uses five code enforcement officers to inspect properties in the community. Cases in which recommended repairs are not made are reviewed by an ordinance board of appeals established by city council. The board's five members include a building inspector, a general contractor, and a property manager. The city's building official serves as a liaison between the board and the city council.

**Timeline** The city's new system for enforcing property maintenance standards has been in place for approximately one year.

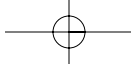
**Budget/funding** Violators of the city's property maintenance ordinances must pay a 15 percent administrative fee, which the city uses to cover its enforcement costs.

**Program description** To encourage home repairs, the city offers discounts of 50 percent on all of its property maintenance permits for homes older than 10 years. Residents now pay about \$25 for permits to replace driveways or windows (when openings must be modified) and have inspections. But if homeowners don't keep up their properties and a neighbor complains that a home has junk in its yard or badly needs a coat of paint, code enforcement officers will verify the need for cleanups or repairs. Residents are then given a specified time, often 10 days, to clean up their properties. An ordinance officer stops by to make sure that the cleanup occurred. If residents refuse to comply, their names are placed on the agenda for the next public hearing of the ordinance board of appeals. The prop-

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erty is posted with a sign announcing the date for the hearing about the property. The board meets twice monthly for a televised meeting and typically hears 8–10 cases. The threat of appearing before the board often persuades a reluctant property owner to make the needed repairs. If the resident appears before the board and the board finds that the situation is a nuisance, the city sends a contractor out to abate the nuisance by, for example, painting the garage and then sends the property owner a bill. If the property owner does not pay the bill, the cost of the repairs goes onto their tax bill. At that point, the homeowner cannot sell the property or refinance a mortgage without paying the bill.

**Results** The city has found that the number of homeowners making the needed repairs increases at every stage of the process. Many residents have called the city in support of the cleanup efforts. The city already looks better, and compliance is much higher than in the past.

