



Leaders at the Core of Better Communities

2010 Annual Awards Program

Program Excellence Awards Nomination Form

Deadline for Nominations: March 12, 2010

Complete this form (sections 1 and 2) and submit with your descriptive narrative.

SECTION 1: Information About the Nominated Program

Program Excellence Award Category (*select only one*):

- ☐ Community Health and Safety
- ☐ Community Partnership
- ☒ Community Sustainability
- ☐ Strategic Leadership and Governance

Name of program being nominated: City of Sandy Springs Vacant Property Enforcement Program

Jurisdiction(s) where program originated: City of Sandy Springs

Jurisdiction population(s): 99,771

Please indicate the month and year in which the program you are nominating was fully implemented. (Note: All Program Excellence Award nominations must have been fully implemented by or before January 31, 2009, to be eligible. The start date should not include the initial planning phase.)

Month: June Year: 2008

Name(s) and title(s) of individual(s) who should receive recognition for this award at the ICMA Annual Conference in San José, California, October 2010. (Each individual listed MUST be an ICMA member to be recognized.):

Name: John McDonough

Title: City Manager Jurisdiction: City of Sandy Springs

Name: Judy Parker, APR

Title: Media & Communications Director Jurisdiction: City of Sandy Springs

Name: _____

Title: _____

Jurisdiction: _____

SECTION 2: Information About the Nominator/Primary Contact

Name of contact: Tisa Moore

Title: Media &
Communications
Manager

Jurisdiction: City of Sandy Springs

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ICMA 2010 Annual Awards, Community Sustainability Awards

City of Sandy Springs (population 50,000 and greater)

Submitted by: Tisa Moore, Media and Communications Manager, City of Sandy Springs

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City of Sandy Springs Vacant Property Enforcement Program (VPEP)

From a resident's perspective, local government's enforcement of quality of life issues is extremely important and has a direct effect on family. The foundation of this work is, however, contingent upon federal laws and statutes, local government's agenda and public opinion. As in any city, local elected officials drive public policy. But what is special about the City of Sandy Springs? Residents. Spearheaded by the current, two-term mayor, they struggled for 30 years to incorporate the City. Therefore, their voice is strong, generally united and very influential. It's not often that a city is incorporated as the 7th largest in the state. The fast-growing, suburb—now the 6th largest city in the state—values its quality of life: the environment, physical and mental health, education, recreation and leisure time and social belonging. The Mayor and Council strive to protect it.

Assessment

Based on an article entitled "Broken Windows" by James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling (which appeared in the March 1982 edition of *The Atlantic Monthly*), the City assumed a strong stance on Code Enforcement-related activity after incorporation in 2005. The theory states: if structures with broken windows are not repaired, the tendency is for criminals to break more windows. Eventually, they may even illegally occupy the building, cause blight or dilapidation, commence with illegal activities and potentially cause life safety hazards such as fire.

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A successful strategy to address this issue is to proactively respond to the problem upon discovery. Having a proactive Code Enforcement program allows City officials to address the broken windows, or within a short time, begin enforcement activities that will address the issues. As such, criminals and

vandals are much less likely to break more windows, or do further damage. These types of issues are instantly addressed and the host of problems normally associated with dilapidation never occurs, thus the residents of the City of Sandy Springs benefit from this enhanced service.

High unemployment, depressed stock markets and major financial woes plagued the end of 2008 through all of 2009. During this period, real estate markets crashed and a record number of property owners lost their home, thus causing an



instant effect on the ground. Whether a large city, or a small rural community, foreclosures have affected municipalities throughout the country. In almost every residential neighborhood, a home is in foreclosure. If not immediately addressed, these problem properties become vacant and therefore demand a comprehensive approach to Code Enforcement.

While Sandy Springs, an affluent northern suburb of Atlanta, was resilient to most of these economic problems, the Code Enforcement Division developed the Vacant Property Enforcement Program. In June 2008, in order to manage substandard, vacant or blighted houses, the Division developed this comprehensive approach to address the issue that required a blend of compliance strategies and enforcement remedies. Traditionally, when confronted with a derelict or vacant property, the Code Enforcement Division inspects the property and issues a notice to the property



owner and other responsible parties listing the specific code violations and/or the nuisance conditions. In order to curtail the increasing amount of vacant/substandard properties in the City of Sandy Springs a systematic inspection program that targets these properties called the **Vacant Property Enforcement Program (VPEP)** was initiated. Subsequently, the program has become popular in the metro-Atlanta area and surrounding jurisdictions recognizing Sandy Springs' leadership and innovation, thus staff is often invited to present the details of the program at professional organizations, meetings and community meetings and this has been considered for replication in other communities.

A Code Enforcement Officer was designated the Vacant Property Coordinator and acts as a liaison among the various departments, agencies and property owners. The officer takes more of a compliance approach than one of enforcement, such that he is the local government point of contact to work with single-family property owners, realtors, home-owners organizations and neighborhoods experiencing derelict or vacant houses.

Having a dedicated officer devoting a percentage of his time as the vacant property coordinator assists property owners, the community at large and the City creatively resolves some of the more complex and sensitive vacant property challenges. The vacant property coordinator was charged with a variety of responsibilities including: identifying vacant properties throughout the City, maintaining a list or database of targeted properties, coordinating efforts among City departments (e.g., code enforcement, police and the City attorney's office) and communicating with elected officials on a quarterly basis.



Many industry experts and economic analysts alike predict that relatively the same negative forces that dictated the overall tempo of the economy last year will still dominate 2010; however, there are



measurable accomplishments that can be linked directly to the effectiveness of the improved service delivery to the public such as:

- Code Enforcement staff has cataloged, photographed and located more than 150 vacant properties throughout the City and denoted information including owner and/or lending institution information;
- Caused the demolition of 25 vacant/dilapidated structures without a City initiated abatement process or use of City funds;
- Maintained a dialogue with property management companies, lending institutions and property owners;
- Obtained compliance on 80 percent of all vacant structures (64 percent are now occupied); and
- Commenced enforcement on multiple properties resulting in more than \$10,000 in fines and penalties.

Program implementation and costs

The program was implemented using existing staffing with work flow allocation. One officer was tasked with the responsibility and dedicated 60 percent of his time to administering the program, while his normal responsibilities were redirected and absorbed by other Code Enforcement Officers.

While the nature of the work involved in this program requires an enhanced skill set, the overall Code Enforcement principles applied are generally accepted practices, therefore required no



additional training costs. There were no supplementary costs associated with implementation other than work flow development, strategy and time costs associated with normal operations.

Lesson learned during planning and implementation

During the planning and implementation stage, there were two noteworthy lessons learned:

- Revising work flow can allow field personnel to concentrate on areas of need and allocate time accordingly and
- Developing a process early can clearly define the program's objectives and the required outcomes.

Analysis of the program

Overall, the success of the program is reflective in the way vacant properties have been managed. The qualitative value of this program is evident to the community in which these properties are located. The program has adaptability in any setting (geographic region), and can be implemented in a relatively short time. Many jurisdictions allocate funds to abatement which, if not recouped, can result in liens being placed on multiple properties throughout the municipality. Due to the enhanced enforcement aspects of this program, there is a "cost recovery" in the fine and penalty phase, as well as an actual savings to the municipality by re-shifting responsibilities of current staffing, while incurring the normal costs associated with providing Code Enforcement coverage. The program is designed to run seamlessly with existing code programs and the processes and relationships that are established with the various stakeholders prove to be helpful in other disciplines such as police and fire. The program can be enhanced by adding a technology component such as real-time updates to property status accessible via the Internet.