

# 2016 Community Sustainability Awards

*Enhanced and Streamlined  
In-Rem Demolition Program*

## DEKALB COUNTY GOVERNMENT CODE ENFORCEMENT DIVISION

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## *DeKalb County, Georgia*

DeKalb County is Georgia's third largest county with more than 750,000 residents calling it home. DeKalb ranks third in total population, and second in total labor force, and attracts a labor force of 1.4 million from six metro area counties. Known for its business and education hub, growing international community and natural wonders, DeKalb County possess unique and important assets located at the heart of the Metropolitan area. The County has access to many interstates and direct access to the world's busiest airport, Hartsfield Jackson International Airport. In addition to a highly diverse population, the County hosts several institutions of higher education, industrial economic zones, and extensive green space areas and parks.

### *Assessment*

The economic and foreclosure crisis has had a devastating impact on neighborhoods throughout DeKalb County including decreasing property values, increased vacancies, crime, blight and abandonment. Improperly maintained and unsecure vacant properties can become a hazard to the health and safety of anyone who may come on or near the property and can adversely affect the aesthetic and economic attributes of communities. While incorporations and annexations have diminished resources at the County's disposal to provide services to areas hit the hardest. The County has experienced prolonged budgetary constraints. These obstacles have made it difficult for the County to attract new investments, improve service delivery, and grow its economic base. Difficulties often arise in locating the person responsible for maintenance of vacant and blighted properties.

The DeKalb County Code Enforcement's *Foreclosure Registry and Vacant Property Registries* play a vital role in protecting neighborhoods against the effects of blight and the nuances that result from property neglect. Communities throughout DeKalb County continue to be negatively impacted by effects of the foreclosure and economic crisis, and a disproportionate number of properties remain vacant; creating an environment for criminal activity while hindering quality of life, economic development, and preventing property values to rebound. A major problem DeKalb was facing was absentee or deceased owners.

### ***Program Implementation***

To remain viable and remain competitive within the metro region, nationally, and globally, DeKalb County recognized the need to evaluate its internal core functions, and identify opportunities to reorganize operations to create greater efficiencies and better respond to the needs of its constituents.

Consistent with strategic goals set by the administration, staff analyzed strengths and opportunities in the areas of Community Development, Sanitation and Code Compliance Operations, and have identified the potential for cost savings through the greater efficiencies that could result from a strategic review and transformation of some of its organizational and functional structures. This analysis has led to the conclusion that there is a unique opportunity to enhance the coverage of the County's Code Compliance operations by partnering with these other departments to effectuate demolitions and abatements throughout the county.

### ***In-Rem Demolitions***

The County’s Code Enforcement Division streamlined and implemented the Action in rem process which is directed against real or personal property, and can be brought against property of debtors in order to collect what is owed, for partition of real property, foreclosure of mortgages, and for enforcement of liens. Action in rem is permitted by a particular court only when that court has authority over the property or when the court’s jurisdiction extends to cover it. Location of the property is important as the court can hold the trial only in the jurisdiction under which the land falls. The judgment can only be against the land and not its owner. Jurisdiction of a court can be exercised, only after parties who are known to have an interest in the property are notified of the proceedings and have been given a chance to present their claim to the court.

Code Enforcement’s ability to get uninhabitable or dangerous properties demolished has been expedited by the newly enhanced process that involves cooperation among several county



departments. In keeping with the Division’s priorities to rehabilitate neighborhoods through this “In Rem” process, DeKalb County has exceeded its goal to demolish 30 dilapidated homes before January 2016, using both private contractors and Sanitation Department resources.

In April, the county executed the demolition of an abandoned house on Windy Ridge Way in Lithonia, GA. The house had been a subject of public interest since it burned in 2011. This demolition marked the implementation of an improved process, which involved the use of DeKalb County Sanitation resources to help expedite the typically long process of a house demolition.