

Changes aim to stimulate purchasing of real estate

By Brian Meyer
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New steps will be taken to encourage people to buy real estate in Buffalo, city economic developers said Wednesday.

One effort will involve a mass mailing to people who own properties next to vacant lots that will be sold at a city foreclosure auction in October. Some neighborhoods qualify for "urban homesteading," allowing property owners to expand their yards by purchasing parcels for \$1.

Brian A. Reilly, the city's new economic development commissioner, also announced a new initiative that will see the city contact block clubs to get input on which properties that are scheduled to go on the auction block should be acquired by the city and demolished.

"The block clubs know their blocks better than anyone else," he said.

Reilly also promised to find ways to make the city's Real Estate Division more responsive to people interested in buying city-owned properties. Buffalo is the largest landowner in the city.

Mayor Byron W. Brown is threatening to fire staff in the real estate office if improvements aren't made. Brown was dismayed to receive a letter from a Cattaraugus County man who wants to buy and renovate a home in Buffalo. The man said he made repeated attempts to contact city real estate officials, but no one got back to him.

City officials said they've received frequent complaints about the real estate office, despite the fact that an additional staffer was hired to help improve operations.

The mayor called the problems "absolutely, positively unacceptable," and he gave an ultimatum during Wednesday's meeting of the CitiStat accountability panel. Brown told employees that the city is serious about delivering results and that the real estate office must change its ways.

"If it doesn't change immediately, there will be more changes made in this department," Brown said. "If it doesn't change, personnel will change."

First Deputy Mayor Steven M. Casey said there have been constant concerns raised about the real estate unit.

Reilly said it is clear the Real Estate Division must "do better." He said one solution might involve using a soon-to-be-unveiled 311 non-emergency calling system to help field real estate inquiries.

Brown and other key Cabinet members discussed ongoing efforts to revitalize certain neighborhoods. The administration has been criticized for employing what some have branded a "demolition-only" strategy. City development officials tried to rebut these claims as they outlined plans that will include the rehabilitation of 296 units throughout the city next year.

Carla Kosmerl, a deputy commissioner for neighborhood development, added that the city is doing things to make it easier for developers to invest in it. Kosmerl said "internal summits" are being held where developers are invited to attend a meeting with a team of city officials who can address a variety of issues in a single sitting.

"We're trying to make it easier every day to do business in the City of Buffalo," Kosmerl said.