



CITY OF FORT BRAGG

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COUNCIL COMMITTEE ITEM SUMMARY REPORT

MEETING DATE: April 5, 2018
TO: Community Development Committee
FROM: Sarah Million McCormick, Assistant Planner
AGENDA ITEM TITLE: Receive Vacant Property Survey Report, Consider Policy Options for Addressing Vacant Residential and Commercial Properties in Fort Bragg, and Make Recommendation to Council

ISSUE:

At the July 24, 2017 City Council meeting, Vice Mayor Lee requested that staff develop an inventory of vacant residential and commercial properties in Fort Bragg and develop policy options to address vacant property issues. The goal of this effort is to increase the inventory of rentable housing units in Fort Bragg and support economic growth. The City Council referred the item to the Community Development Committee for further development and consideration.

On September 26, 2017, the Community Development Committee discussed the issue, considered various policy and program options and recommended that staff start with a Vacant Property Owner Survey and that preliminary work be undertaken to evaluate the pros and cons of establishing a Vacant Property Registration Ordinance. This recommendation was taken to City Council on November 13, 2017 for discussion and Council directed staff to conduct a Vacant Property Survey.

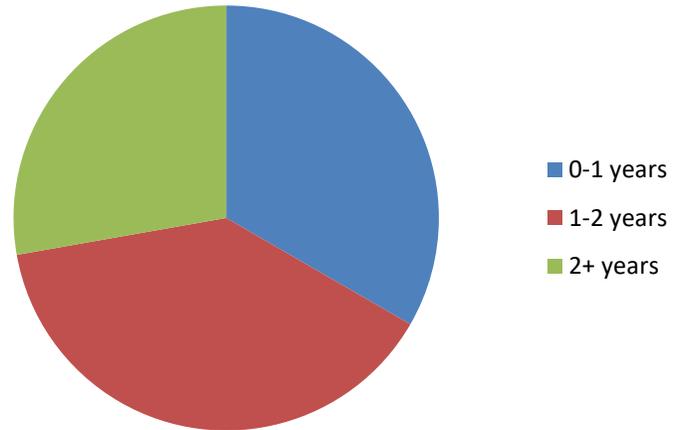
SUMMARY ANALYSIS:

In January 2018, 61 survey-letters were mailed (Attachment 1 - Vacant Property Survey) to addresses obtained from a City of Fort Bragg Utility Bill Report with inactive water meters that were inactive for more than three months. This is the easiest mechanism for the City to identify likely vacant properties. Of these 61 survey-letters, 27 responses were received from property owners, for about a 44% response rate. Only one of the responses was for commercial structures, and thus there is insufficient data to analyze commercial buildings. Consequently the survey results summarized below pertain only to residential structures.

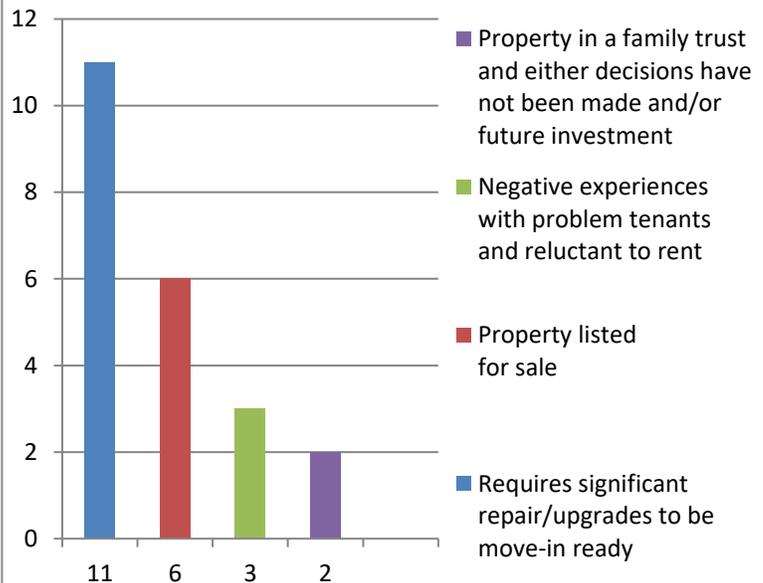
61 surveys mailed,
27 responses submitted,
18 unoccupied units identified.
These 18 properties have been
vacant for:

0-1 year: 6 units
1-2 years: 7 units
2+ years: 5 units

18 Unoccupied Units Reported



The need for repairs/upgrades
for buildings to be move-in ready
is the predominant reason
residential properties are vacant.
Other key reasons are illustrated
in the chart.



Maintenance

All but one survey reported to conduct regular landscaping and building maintenance on an as needed basis

Police authorization to enforce NO TRESSPASSING

Twelve out of fifteen property owners want to voluntarily list their property with the City in order to provide authorization to the Fort Bragg Police Department to arrest trespassers.

The purpose of the Vacant Property Survey was to gain a better understanding of what motivates or constrains owners of vacant property in order to better inform policy and/or program decisions regarding vacant properties in Fort Bragg. According to survey respondents, the cost and need for building repairs is the primary reason residential properties remain vacant. In many instances these repairs are costly and property owners may not have the funds to complete the necessary upgrades for residences to be move-in ready. Given that only one commercial property owner responded to the survey it is difficult to know if commercial properties are also vacant due to disrepair, or if they are vacant for other reasons. With that said, staff recommends developing two separate approaches regarding residential and commercial vacancies based on the different impacts commercial and residential vacancies have on our community. For instance, commercial vacancies in the Central Business District (the civic, cultural and commercial center of our community) are a visual blight, which may negatively impact economic performance of other retailers and detour new investment. Whereas the effects of vacant residential units result in removing much needed housing units for our residents and can negatively impact the property value and vitality of neighborhoods.

Some policy and programmatic options to consider in residential zones include the following:

- Create a fee based annual registration process to provide updated contact information;
- Create a no fee annual registration process to provide updated contact information;
- Create a program for vacant property owners to voluntarily submit a letter to the City which authorizes the Fort Bragg Police Department to arrest trespassers;
- Develop written materials and designate a point of contact in City Hall to provide information about the building permit process, loan and funding opportunities available and to answer questions regarding maintenance and security requirements to comply with the City's ordinances;
- Support community engagement to develop creative community-based solutions tailored to address various housing issues such as Healthy Mendocino's Housing Action Team, Senior Center bulletin board, concerned neighbors, or perhaps social media forums.

Some policy and programmatic options to consider in commercial zones include the following:

- Develop a Vacant Property Registration Ordinance that outlines and defines standards for the maintenance of vacant commercial buildings;
- Reduce fees (sign review, design review, and/or water/sewer capacity) to encourage reuse of vacant buildings;
- Consider changes to the Sprinkler ordinance to allow flexibility in evaluating potential fire risks of individual buildings based on their location and use. For example the City could consider exempting buildings that don't have nearby structures and don't have sensitive populations from the \$75,000 trigger to install fire sprinkler systems;
- Consider additional changes to the zoning ordinance to reduce additional permitting requirements for commercial buildings;
- Prioritize economic development to attract new businesses; and/or
- Implement targeted code enforcement in commercial zones with escalating penalties.

The discussion regarding vacant properties and the subsequent direction from City Council to initiate the Vacant Property Survey was motivated by a need to create more housing opportunities and to foster economic development. It may well be that the initiation of this dialogue has already started conversations and added under-utilized buildings to the real estate market. That said, policy and programmatic changes set in motion by the leadership of City

Council would expedite the process. Staff recommendation is for the Community Development Committee to consider a Vacant Property Ordinance for Commercial Buildings that outlines and defines the standards for maintenance, and a separate registration process for vacant residential properties in order to provide updated contact information of owners.

RECOMMENDED ACTION:

1. Staff recommends the Community Development Committee recommendation to City Council considering a Vacant Property Ordinance for Commercial Buildings that outlines and defines the standards for maintenance, and a separate registration process for vacant residential properties that will provide updated contact information of owners.

ALTERNATIVE ACTIONS:

1. Discuss policy and programmatic options to address residential and commercial vacancies in Fort Bragg, provide direction to staff and make recommendation to City Council.
2. Take no action at this time.

ATTACHMENTS:

Attachment 1 – Vacant Property Survey

Attachment 2 – City Council November 13, 2017 Staff Report

NOTIFICATION:

Notify Me List(s): Fort Bragg Downtown Businesses, Economic Development, Affordable Housing