



OFFICE OF MAYOR LENNY CURRY

ST. JAMES BUILDING
117 W. DUVAL STREET, SUITE 400
JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA 32202

TEL: (904) 630-1776
FAX: (904) 630-2391
www.coj.net

Blight Subcommittee Report and Recommendations

E. Denise Lee, Chair

Members – Paul Astleford, Susan Caven, Alex Coley, Tripp Gulliford, Chris Hagan,
Suzanne Jenkins, Ali Korman Shelton, Jackie Perry, Ivan Rodriguez, Will Torres

General Counsel Representative – Jason R. Teal

Department Representatives – Kimberly Scott, Jeff Foster and Caleena Shirley

The feeling, when walking through a part of town, that this neighborhood has seen better days. The decline of a part of the city from thriving neighborhood to encroaching ghettodom. . . . The first signs of blight are poorly kept properties, damaged building facades and an increasing number of "for sale" signs.

Blight can worsen or recover, but if aided by a poor economy, it can be the precursor to the descent of the neighborhood into ghetto status. Jobs stay scarce, the upper middle classes leave because the area is no longer "desirable," the lower middle classes leave to find jobs in other towns. As property values plunge, the neighborhood becomes populated by the very poor, who can't afford to live anywhere else. Since ethnic and class lines often run parallel, the neighborhood often changes color. As buildings fall into disrepair, for sale signs give way to boarded up windows. In its final state, the neighborhood is a slum, a ghetto, plagued with crime, disease and, above all, crushing, inescapable poverty.

Excerpt from *The Definition of Blight*, Urban Dictionary.

Mayor Curry established the Blight Transition Subcommittee to identify and develop programs within the Executive Branch to develop proud, safe and clean neighborhoods and communities within the City of Jacksonville. Mayor Curry recognized the work and progress achieved by the City Council's Ad Hoc Committee on Neighborhood Blight, which started in October 2013 and who began examining and combating the blight and blighting influences that were plaguing the City's neighborhoods.

The Transition Subcommittee's charge was to develop a framework to build on the City Council's work and to continue the cooperative and synergistic relationship between the executive and legislative branches of government that will transcend any one group of elected officials to be an ongoing and continuing effort on behalf of Jacksonville's neighborhoods and citizens.

The Blight Transition Subcommittee recognizes that the Jacksonville City Council can only accomplish so much through the creation of laws and regulations to combat blight. Without the support and cooperation of a strong Mayor's Office and administration, those laws and regulations amount to no more than simply words on paper. Proper implementation and enforcement is critical to accomplishing the **Fight Blight** goals and objectives. Examining the root causes of blight with imagination and creativity and using motivational factors to encourage participation by all of Jacksonville's residents, community leaders, businesses and governmental agencies will help defeat apathy and aid in this effort. Specific and targeted programs must be developed and used to attack the root causes of blight and nurture community pride which will create a sustainable system of pro-activism in Jacksonville and thwart reintroduction of **blight** into our community. A meaningful metric system must be created to measure progress toward accomplishing these goals and to provide appropriate feedback on the effectiveness and success of the City's efforts.

The City Council's Ad Hoc Committee identified its charge as being to create a comprehensive plan to maintain city-owned and privately-owned properties and rights-of-way that violate city ordinances and to develop and implement an on-going marketing and public relations campaign to educate the public and create a sense of community pride. The Ad Hoc Committee has held more than fifty meetings since its formation, which included significant citizen and community participation, and has examined many issues related to maintenance of City rights-of-way and private properties and other factors causing blight in Jacksonville's neighborhoods.

Attached for review is a copy of the legislation that was created or is currently pending to address blight and blight causes as a result of the City Council's Ad Hoc Committee's work.

Mayor Curry's Blight Transition Subcommittee was charged with engaging in further study as to the causes of blight and providing recommendations and tools to reduce it. The Committee was charged with four key objectives:

- **Evaluate the Fight Blight Initiative's effectiveness – is it sufficiently funded, does it appropriately focus, does it have the necessary tools.**
- **Reestablish specific metrics for use by public and private service providers so success can be clearly measured.**
- **Identify additional alternative resources for this important work.**
- **Identify additional private partners who can be brought in to the aid of the effort.**

The Transition Subcommittee on Blight has defined blight as:

Anything that detracts and devalues community pride, visual attractiveness or economic vitality of neighborhoods in our City because we are, "One City, One Jacksonville!"

The Transition Subcommittee held eight meetings between June 11, 2015 and July 9, 2015. The Subcommittee received presentations and materials from representatives from the General Counsel's Office; Jacksonville Sheriff's Office; the City's Public Works Department (including its Mowing and Landscape Maintenance Division and Solid Waste Division); Planning and Development Department (including its Building Inspection Division, Current Planning

Division, and Housing and Community Development Division); and Regulatory Compliance Department (including its Municipal Code Compliance Division). The Subcommittee requested that each agency identify its current responsibilities and efforts toward addressing blight and the struggles each agency experienced that inhibited its effectiveness and recommend solutions to those struggles. Through this process, the Transition Subcommittee identified the programs that are most effective and what impediments exist that hinder their efforts. The Subcommittee also benefitted from significant involvement and input from private citizens and representatives from various community organizations, interest groups and stakeholders.

Specific recommendations were made to meet the Subcommittee's charge, accomplish its enumerated key objectives and identify **short term** and **long term** goals. It became apparent that there are common themes that this Administration must face, and the recommendations made today are to provide a path forward as we start the journey taking the City of Jacksonville from "**BLIGHT TO BEAUTY**".

Key Objective I. Evaluate the Fight Blight Initiative's effectiveness – is it sufficiently funded, does it appropriately focus, does it have the necessary tools.

The Transition Subcommittee found that many City agencies, as part of their current duties and charges, are engaged in activities geared toward elimination of blight. These activities should be allowed to continue; however the Subcommittee also identified areas where those duties were unfocused, uncoordinated and unduly reactive. Efforts should be streamlined, coordinated with other agencies, and improved. Additional funding for some of these efforts may be needed, including funding for widespread marketing and promotion to engage the targeted communities. Current marketing efforts, such as the Jax Can blight mascot, the Fight Blight mobile app, the tire and snipe sign buybacks and the JTA bus wrap, should be expanded to provide maximum outreach and community participation.

Short Term Goals

1. Create a group of individuals (possibly Transition Subcommittee members) possessing appropriate subject matter experience and knowledge to develop a strategic vision and plan for the Fight Blight initiative and to create a framework for its implementation.
2. To continue to focus on the existing objectives of the City Council's Ad Hoc Blight Committee by establishing a set list of goals, measurements and accountability to develop a cooperative agenda and ensure that all available resources (funding, capital, operational) are being directed to accomplish the objectives.
3. Enforce the Certificate of Use (COU) provisions of the zoning code and require site plans for each application. A great example that we are currently experiencing is a former doctor's/business office now is a small used car lot. Fences are put up at the edge of the sidewalk, the whole parking lot is filled with cars and there is nowhere for employees and customers to park so they park the cars for sale on the sidewalks and rights of ways during the day. Municipal Code Compliance Division would have a greater ability to enforce zoning requirements.

4. Repeat Offenders should be dealt with in a manner that prevents them from continually tying up our enforcement resources.
5. Engage in a comprehensive review of the existing landscape ordinance and address any aspects that inhibit its effectiveness and implementation.
6. Continue building on the existing cooperative relationship with the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office to coordinate the City's civil efforts with JSO's criminal authority to eliminate crime and havens for criminals in the City's neighborhoods and to facilitate an increased use of inmates to eliminate blight conditions.

Long Term Goals

1. Review funding resources that could be used to support blight efforts beyond funding already in place for existing agency activities. Ensure that the resources are directed to: (a) hire and support the necessary personnel for programs and initiatives to be successful; and (b) support and guarantee that programs and initiatives have the necessary resources to be successful.
2. Create productive strategies for vacant land and housing (e.g. create public spaces, community gardens, rental and homeownership opportunities).
3. Establish a land bank to provide the City the flexibility to acquire derelict, abandoned or persistently blighted properties and transfer title to those properties to individuals or entities that will place them back into productive use.
4. The Housing and Neighborhoods Department should be reestablished as a separate agency. It should be given more resources to actively promote development of formal neighborhood organizations where they are absent and with an initial focus on areas that are blighted.
5. Create a **Charter Neighborhood Program** to identify a particular blighted neighborhood to which City resources will be focused with the goal of eliminating the blight so the Charter Neighborhood can serve as a catalyst for the redevelopment and revitalization of surrounding neighborhoods.

Key Objective II. Reestablish specific metrics for use by public and private service providers so success can be clearly measured.

The City has multiple agencies that are a part of the Fight Blight effort. Often those agencies are called upon to address a particular problem or issue in isolation, or view their role as limited to that as specified in their enabling legislation or other similar charging criteria without seeing the agency as being within a larger framework to address the larger blight problem. Additionally, the Subcommittee discovered that some agencies' efforts were hindered by a lack of an overall strategic plan resulting in an inefficient use of that agency's limited resources.

Short Term Goals

1. Establish a **strike team** composed of assigned City personnel and Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office representatives to determine which neighborhoods have the most pressing needs as it relates to blight issues. The strike team will be responsible to "move the needle" in favor of **beauty over blight**.
2. Set blight categories and subcategories and measure success around those (in conjunction with a set of “Goals & Objectives”).

Example of Categories and Sub-Categories:

Blight to Beauty Category	Safety Category
Loitering	Abandoned structure
Mowing and Landscape	Lighting
Abandoned properties	
Abandoned structures	

Example of Goals and Objectives:

Blight to Beauty Category	Goals & Objectives
Loitering	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Reduce Loitering b. Assessment of current trash receptacles c. Need for installation and/or maintenance of new trash receptacles d. Establish loitering educational program for property owners

Example Implementation of Categories, Goals by Neighborhood:

Blight to Beauty Category	Goals & Objectives	Neighborhood ABC
Mowing and Landscape	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Mowing of ROW b. Citations c. Liens d. Coordinate with FDOT regarding care of its ROW responsibilities. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. Mowing of Avenue ABC ii. Mowing of Road ABC iii. Mowing of Public Lot ABC iv. Follow-up with citation on private lot ABC

Long Term Goals

1. Update and maintain neighborhood action plans and develop objective metrics in order to prioritize target neighborhoods to receive City resources to minimize agencies’ limited resources being “spread too thin”.

2. Create, develop and implement consistent design standards for landscaping public rights of way and include a funding source for ongoing maintenance beyond bare minimum standards.

Key Objective III. Identify additional alternative resources for this important work.

Merely throwing money at the blight problem is not the solution. Blight is a highly individualized and multi-faceted problem that has unique and different causes and solutions. Certain themes pervade what is traditionally known as “blight”; however the causes and fixes for a blighted community must begin within that community. Understanding the causes of the blight for that community, as well as germinating the solutions to that blight, must originate within that community. The City must use its tools and resources to facilitate that process so the Fight Blight solution will continue to carry on in that neighborhood even after the City’s resources are redirected to another community in need.

Short Term Goals

1. Establish a recurring event called "CITY HALL at your neighborhood". At least once per quarter, the Mayor, his staff and department heads and other invited personnel, would visit a specific blighted neighborhood of the City to provide information on community services available from the City. This initiative will provide the Administration with hands-on facts of the necessities of the community, and an ability to track progress on pending works and initiatives. It would raise the level of awareness and importance to the community and Mayor's staff that this is a serious issue and all parties must be part of the solution.
2. Reestablish the **Neighborhood Summit**. The City used to host an annual event that brought all the neighborhoods together in one place to learn of City services and that provided help with programs and training for the neighborhood leaders to be informative.
3. Utilize the **Neighborhood Action Plans** that were developed with the community and filed with the planning department and housing department. Most of them were codified through legislation.
4. Evaluate national best practices to assess and revamp the process/program by which neighborhood associations are registered, developed and information regarding these associations are relayed to the public.

Long Term Goals

1. Establish a **Streetscape Commission (Beauty to Blight Commission)**, to encompass the former charge of the Jacksonville Landscape Commission and to have a focus on the natural and built environment composing the streetscape.
2. Create a comprehensive **Neighborhood Map** (similar to the one created in 1996) that would be periodically updated (annually or semi-annually). Display the Neighborhood Map in all public buildings. Identify every neighborhood area and geographic area in

Duval County in the Neighborhood Map. Maintain current information that would be associated with this map, and have an online or interactive component that can be clicked to display relevant information for each area to include, for example, registered Neighborhood Associations, Shadcos, Adopt-A-Road (City) and Adopt-A-Highway (State) groups, and that will identify gaps and needs for that area - for example, where there are no neighborhood associations and where there are roadways that have not been adopted for litter control.

Key Objective IV. Identify additional private partners who can be brought in to the aid of the effort.

Due to the size of Jacksonville, the Subcommittee recognized that it is unrealistic for City agencies to be able to adequately address all blight 100% of the time. It became apparent that the City needs to leverage its limited resources with increased participation from the private sector. The City's largest asset is its people. The City needs to encourage participation by citizens, businesses, churches, community groups, neighborhood associations and other community stakeholders. An unfortunate recent reality is that concerns brought to the City's attention from those groups were not responded to, considered, advanced or remedied. This created a feeling of apathy against involvement in improving the condition of our City. Those feelings need to be changed so the City can deputize its citizens to actively participate in the Fight Blight effort.

Short Term Goals

1. Work with local community partners to establish educational programs and community events that combat blight. The educational programs should serve to teach younger and older generations about loitering, trash pick-ups, city services and programs. These programs should be geared to raise responsibility and ownership from the citizens with their community. The educational program should be established and coordinated with the assistance of Duval County Public Schools. The community events will also serve as an educational tool, and empower neighborhoods. Picking up trash, repairing and refurbishing parks, among others, will serve that purpose.
2. Partner with organizations such as Boy and Girl Scouts, the YMCA, public libraries, senior centers, among others, a program can be established to raise awareness of blight. One of the best resources Jacksonville has is its people.
3. Strengthen the City's six Citizen Advisory Planning Councils to ensure that their concerns and opinions are considered and given weight in policy decisions.
4. Identify and encourage neighborhood leaders to form neighborhood associations so that larger communities of residents have a voice and have "local representation" of neighborhood issues and blight factors that need to be addressed, as well as pooling resources of experienced citizens to creatively find solutions to the issues confronting their neighborhoods.

Long Term Goals

1. Strengthen the City's parks by developing an outside funding source to support development, improvements and acquisition of public parks. Encourage neighborhood groups, churches and businesses to participate in the Adopt-a-Park and the Adopt-a-Street programs.
2. Support and assist neighborhood associations, churches and non-profit groups willing to help with neighborhood beautification, tree planting, river protection, litter and graffiti abatement, community gardens and other environmental projects.
3. Develop a **Commercial Corridor Business Association** program to encourage the development of business associations similar in scope and function as the existing neighborhood association programs to emphasize that business owners and operators are part of the community too, and they must be part of the solution.

Conclusion

Mayor Curry's Blight Transition Subcommittee recognizes that the citizens of Jacksonville have spoken on many issues that affect their community, such as the billboard ban and sign regulations, landscape requirements and tree mitigation. These requirements, which have been adopted by voter referendum and legislative action, have not always been included in the initiatives of the Mayor and legislative body of the City of Jacksonville. Frustration has led to **apathy** by Jacksonville residents in the care and upkeep of Jacksonville's neighborhoods and has created a **dangerous downward spiral in beauty, crime, property values and overall quality of life**.

Unless the City undertakes a coordinated effort to address this issue and reengage and include the City's most abundant resource – its citizens, blight will continue to drag down Jacksonville. Overall, the City's agencies and resources are well positioned to undertake this endeavor. But a better job needs to be done coordinating and applying those resources within a framework geared towards elimination of blight.

Blight is a local and intimate problem within a particular community or neighborhood. Mayor Curry's and his Administration's blight fighting efforts will allow a direct interface with Jacksonville's businesses, neighborhood groups, churches and residents. Blight fighting efforts will continue to be recognized and positive results felt within neglected communities to make lives better, more prosperous, more enjoyable and safer and crime free for those citizens.