




The Thing That Wouldn't Go Away

(A Horror Story with a Happy Ending)

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Every city has a high-visibility, long-term issue that does not seem capable of resolution.

No matter how you try to run away from it,
no matter what you throw at,
no matter what you re-name it or cover it with,
it will not go away.

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Tucson's “Thing that wouldn't go away” was **slum properties**.

Neighborhoods called about them.

Council members complained about them.

Staff said they were following the code and doing

all they could do.

– **Slum properties would not go away.**

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Introduction to Tucson

- Tucson is the oldest continuously inhabited city in the United States first occupied by Native Americans and then Spanish. Tucson became part of Mexico and finally was incorporated into the United States through the Gadsden purchase in 1853.
- A sunbelt city that has grown rapidly since World War II, Tucson is 227 square miles with a population of 513,322.
- It consists almost entirely of single story structures with the exception of commercial and apartment buildings.
- Only 53% of homes are owner occupied. The sprawling, mixed development over the years has resulted in neighborhoods with industrial and commercial uses as well as apartments, non-owner and owner occupied homes.
- Slum conditions are not centralized to certain areas – they are found in all areas of the city.

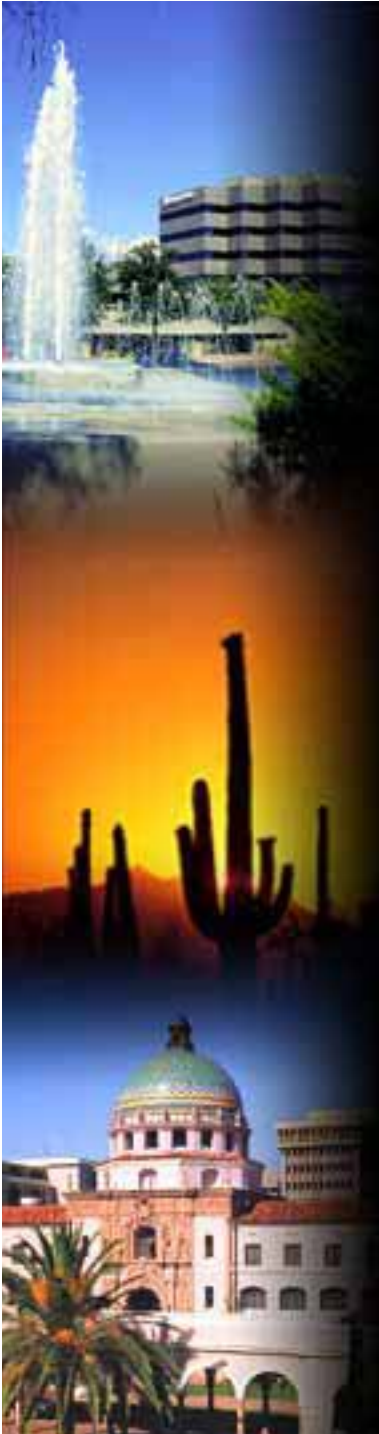
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Backyard cooker - near open sewer



Open sewer

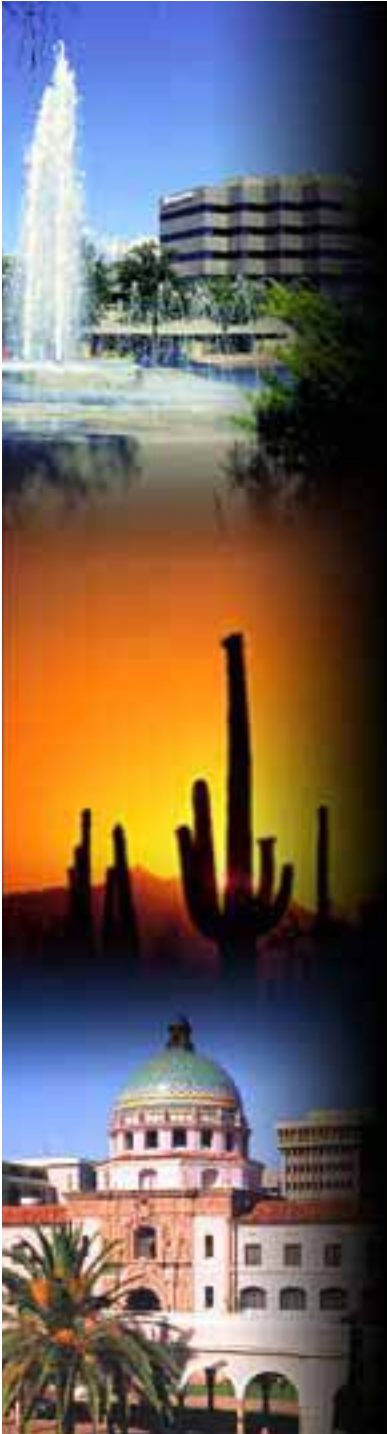


Clean front yard



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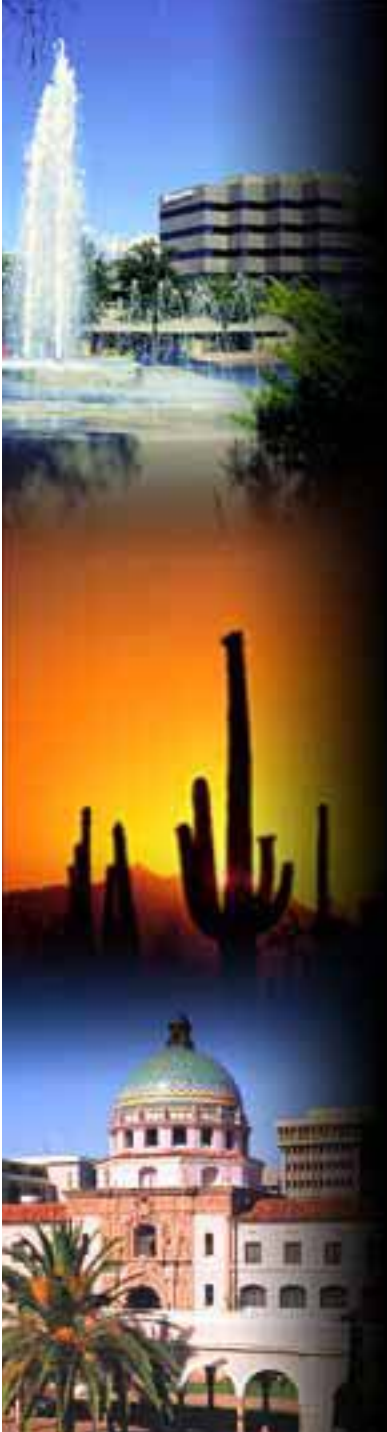


The backyard

Remains of the pets











How did it get so bad?

- Management inattention
- Underfunded staffing
- Community complacency
- Elected officials seeking to be responsive and not punitive
- Strong property rights state
- Strong lobbying groups
- Transiency of populations
- In-migration of people unaware of codes
- Lack of neighborhood stability
- Neighborhoods concerned but not effective

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How it came about

- Tucson's pilot program to eradicate slum properties came from long discussion and careful thought about what was working and not working in departments responsible for abatement.
- Whose responsibility was slum abatement?
- A new approach was developed – SABER – Slum Abatement and Enforcement Response
- **SABER** sought to eliminate the fragmentation of response to slum properties.
- The mission was to eradicate slum properties by making this issue everyone's responsibility.

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Specialization

Seven city departments deal with aspects of slum properties:

- Development Services (structural and permit issues) - 4 inspectors
- Community Services (housing placement and social service issues) -
Inspection staff for federally funded structures
- Fire Department - 4 inspectors
- Police Department
- Solid Waste - 6 inspectors
- City Attorney (enforcement) - 2 attorneys
- Planning - 2 zoning enforcement

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Specialization created Fragmentation

- A complaint resulted in an inspector from a specific department responding.
- Departments could cite or enforce City codes relating to their department only.
- Resolutions were effected by departments independent of other departments.
- If it went to citation, these were brought to court by each department separately.
- Individual citations were often dismissed or treated lightly.
- Other slum issues under another department's authority might not be addressed.
- At best, a part of the problem went away.
- Slum properties soon reverted to their former state.
 - Neighborhoods called about them.
 - Council members complained about them.
 - Staff said they were following the code and doing all they could do.
- **Slum properties would not go away.**

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The Big Question:

- Could we craft an inter-departmental effort that would address slum conditions of properties holistically?

Obstacles

- FEAR OF FAILURE - What we heard staff say:
- We've been doing our best - how can something else work?
- We haven't had a successful inter-departmental effort on a big issue before.
- What if I stick my neck out and no one else does?
- What if staff responds with - "Oh, another new initiative" and does not give its full support?
- Previous City Management never sustained an effort of this kind - will this be any different?

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FEAR OF LACK OF CONTROL

What we heard Department Directors say:

- My department has a mission, now we have to subscribe to a different mission?
- How is my department going to accomplish its “real” work and do this project as well?
- Will I lose control of my employees?
- Will my department lose funding to support the bigger effort?
- Who will be in charge and will I be comfortable with the person directing the project?

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Department Directors' FEAR OF SUCCESS

- What if it succeeds and someone decides my department doesn't need as much funding as it used to have?
- What if my department is no longer essential?
- What if I am no longer essential?
- Departments are specialized – will staff be required to become generalists?
- Does this mean more training for staff?
- Does this mean higher wages for staff?
- Will staff be less loyal to our department?
- Will staff be less loyal to me?

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FEAR OF PUBLIC REACTION

- Will the public accept this new program?
- There are geographic sub-cultures in our City with different expectations – how do we address this?
- The public is not knowledgeable about existing codes and who is responsible for enforcement.
- Some members of the public think staff is too lenient and some think they are too severe.
- The public wants enforcement except when the enforcement is directed at them.

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How did we overcome the obstacles? Leadership and visibility respond to FEAR OF FAILURE

- A strategic planning process was undertaken defining six key areas of concern - one was Neighborhoods
- Slum conditions were identified this as a critical issue by City management.
- Mayor and Council voted to make this a critical issue.
- All critical projects are tracked and reported on a monthly basis to City Management and quarterly to Mayor and Council.
- Media and public get information on project status.
- Media coverage, national recognition bolsters staff's enthusiasm and buy-in.
- Department interaction and comfort level increased with creation of "Service Team" meetings composed of departments with similar missions.

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Uniform and inclusive mission responds to FEAR OF LACK OF CONTROL and FEAR OF SUCCESS

- Mission to address this issue includes the missions of the component departments.
- Departments contribute financially but funding is also added to the project - not taken away from existing efforts.
- Departments maintain their unique identity and collaborate on this project.
- Staff continue to report to their own department as well as the group effort.
- Staff have not become generalists - they are specialists who are knowledgeable about other departments' processes.
- Department Directors are fully vested in the project and attend monthly meetings.
- Department Directors are knowledgeable about the project and any one is able to chair the meeting.

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Building community trust through training, outreach and media coverage

- Training within departments ensures uniformity of response.
- Inter-departmental training (not cross-training) ensures that staff understands what is in the City Code.
- Consolidation of City Code puts all property-related issues under the same heading to simplify community awareness.
- Media coverage of the initial high visibility cases increased public confidence in our response.
- Public outreach leads to a better understanding that increases positive response.
- Self-improvement on the neighborhood level is offered before enforcement begins. (South Park)

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How well have we done?

- Continuing high level of Mayor and Council support
- Continuing high level of City Management support
- Continuing high level of citizen, community and media support
- Multiple violations presented in a coordinated way in court have elicited a more favorable and stronger response from the judiciary.
- Some former non-supporters - Multi Housing Association and landlords - have become supporters.
- Increased accountability on the part of slum property owners.
- All owners become more aware of the aesthetics of their properties.

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Reality Check

WHAT HAS CHANGED

- We used to get few calls from tenants - fear of retribution and fear that nothing would get done
- Tenants more readily call about conditions
- Now adjacent residents call
- Now Neighborhood Associations call
- Landlords have become part of the solution
- Number of cases to the Housing Appeals Board has dropped dramatically

WHAT HAS NOT CHANGED

- Still must abide with due process
- Code compliance is still 30 days or longer depending upon the violation
- It still takes time

WHAT HAS BEEN ADDED

- Back to Basics
- NETeams
- Homeowner and Landlord repair support
- Public information campaign

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Further Refinements

- Possible pooling of some funding for duplicative functions currently funded for each department.
- Possible pooling of some resources for duplicative functions currently supplied from each department.
- Consolidated ordinances reviewed to identify gaps.
- Community input to identify other issues that still need to be addressed.
- Look for ways in which the implementation of this model can be replicated for other issues.

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Seven Lessons Learned

1. Walk before you run - Starting SABER as a pilot project was critical.
2. Get your public input up front - Getting more input from the public before presenting the proposed code changes to the Mayor and Council could have prevented an initial reaction of mistrust and would have sped up the approval process. You can't make everyone happy, but you can listen to them.

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3. Trust staff to do their jobs, and listen to their input - The best problem-solving ideas often come from the folks who are out there doing the day-to-day work of the project (in our case, the inspectors who inspect the properties). Once our inspectors saw that their ideas would get genuine consideration and implementation, their commitment to the project increased.

4. Continuity is key - Having designated contacts within each of the participating departments, and keeping those contacts the same throughout the project, helped prevent communication breakdowns and kept the project moving forward.

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5. Be honest about expectations and results - When we started the project, we didn't over promise, which helped to keep expectations reasonable. When we reported results, we didn't exaggerate the positive or ignore the negative, which helped us build trust with the governing body and the public.

6. Keep it Simple - The project was able to launch and to succeed because we didn't try to do too much. If we had attempted to create a new department, or to restructure existing departments or budgets, the project likely would have stalled out.

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7. Get lucky - We lucked out with our timing. We had a new City Manager and new City Attorney hired at roughly the same time; both saw blight elimination and code enforcement as priorities, and both had experience with the issues. The key was that we recognized this good fortune, and acted on it quickly.

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