

# Dealing with Blight and Absentee Landlords

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Definition of Blight..... *Webster's Dictionary*: An impairing or frustrating influence.

*American Heritage Dictionary*: Something that impairs growth, withers hopes and ambitions, or impedes progress and prosperity.

There probably isn't a city or town anywhere that would not agree that blight, however defined, negatively impacts quality of life and the economic viability of the community. Some, although not all, blight stems from absentee ownership of rental properties. Two of the three workshop panelists at MML's recent convention, Hampstead Town Manager Ken Decker and Bill Calloway, Rental Housing Coordinator, City of Rockville, talked about the value of developing strong rental housing licensing policies as a deterrent to blight. The policies in both municipalities possess many common elements, although implementation and enforcement of their policies are handled differently due to population size and financial resources.

## Tips for Designing a Good Rental Housing Licensing Policy

### **Survey all housing stock and incorporate rental housing information into a comprehensive property database.**

According to Ken Decker, any municipality can affordably acquire a computer and database software that will allow it to develop a comprehensive property database. The Town of Hampstead uses its database for almost every property-related activity including the issuance and renewal of rental housing licenses. With the same database, the Town can also track complaints concerning any property.

### **Require every landlord to possess a rental license for every rental property.**

There are a couple of ways to find out if properties are being rented. Send out rental property surveys. Ask neighbors about a suspected rental. Look at the utility billing records. If the property owner's address and the utility billing address are different, a rental situation could be occurring.

### **Require a local contact person.**

Some absentee landlords never visit their properties. The rentals are handled through a management company. Make it a requirement to have a local contact person who can receive notices and correspondence on behalf of the owner.

### **Educate landlords and tenants.**

Let them know about the rules and their responsibilities. Hold them responsible for the property's condition. Don't wait until the property is so derelict that it becomes too expensive to remedy.

### **Make fighting blight a community responsibility.**

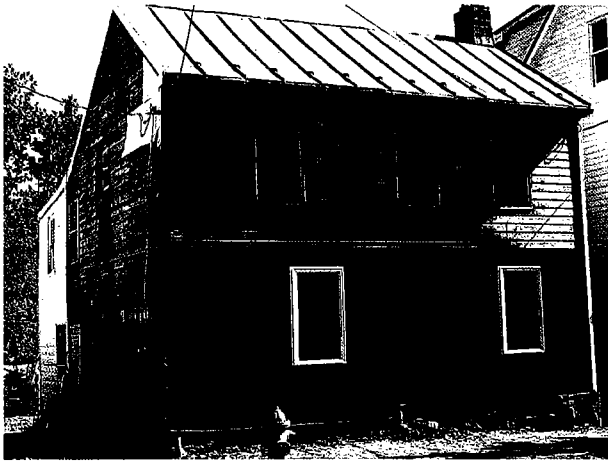
Educate the public about landlord tenant obligations. Attend homeowner and civic association meetings to find out what's happening

in neighborhoods. Enlist their support to report problems and encourage cooperation from landlords and tenants as the "good neighbor" thing to do.

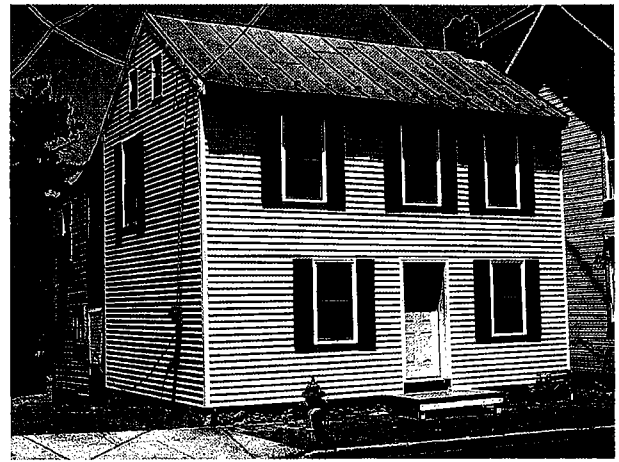
### **Endeavor to have face-to-face meetings with landlords and tenants.**

It is much more likely that you will gain cooperation from folks you have actually met. Mr. Decker believes that, "Most landlords want to preserve the value of a rental." He said that, "Whenever possible, encourage the landlord to become an ally rather than an adversary in fighting blight."





**BEFORE**



**AFTER**

The third workshop panelist, Mike Blank, Frederick's Manager of Code Enforcement, talked about the City's unique and aggressive Blight Abatement Program. In 1999, the City established criteria for deteriorating property categories of (1) Worst, (2) Significant, and (3) Minor to Moderate. In 2001, the City identified the 10 worst residential and commercial properties and posted photos of the properties (no addresses provided) on the City's website. This action really captured the attention of the property owners, prompting many to fix the problems. Other properties were just sold and new owners made the needed repairs or renovations. Currently, the website showcases many "before" and "after" photos, the effect of which has prodded others to improve their blighted properties.

The owners of blighted properties are sent courtesy letters, as a first step in Frederick's Blight Abatement Program, explaining why their properties are included. The letter also announces that the City will be contacting them in the near future and will work with them to solve the problems. It is the City's goal to have all blighted properties, including accessory structures, meet at least minimum standards.

Hampstead's approach to every (non-repeat offending) landlord is also friendly and cooperative. The Town even offers a free work-

shop for landlords emphasizing the importance of things such as having a comprehensive lease and screening potential tenants.

All three speakers agree that to deal with blight, the city or town must be proactive. You also need to maintain a "paper trail", which is a detailed record of all communications with property owners, including names, dates, all forms of correspondence, photos and actions taken. It may be necessary to produce these records in the event that the problem ends up in court.

Mr. Decker nicely summarized efforts to rid a community of blight by saying that "Every municipality has the statutory authority necessary to clean up a problem property. Some landlords will turn a simple problem into a royal pain; however, in the end, landlords generally follow the path of least resistance. To fight blight, a Town must make the easiest course of action cleaning up the property." ■

*To find out more about these municipal programs, contact:*

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**BEFORE**



**AFTER**