

TO: THE COMMON COUNCIL: DATE: September 16, 2004

FROM: DEPARTMENT: Audit and Control  
DIVISION: Audit  
SUBJECT: |: **Fire Department Demolitions**  
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PRIOR COUNCIL REFERENCE: (IF ANY) |:  
Ex. (Item No. xxx, C.C.P. xx/xx/xx)

TEXT: (TYPE SINGLE SPACE BELOW)

As per the City Charter, only the following individuals are authorized to order the demolition of a structure: Article 14, Section 10 states that the Fire Department's "commissioner, any deputy commissioner or any battalion chief on duty at a conflagration may direct and cause to be torn down.....buildings which are deemed hazardous and likely to take fire or to convey the fire to other buildings."

**Findings:**

1. The demolition of the property at 1386 Bailey Avenue was listed in error. A structure still exists at that address, however, research from non-Fire Department records shows that a fire took place at 1400 Bailey Avenue on the same day. The City paid for a demolition at that address.
2. The sample also included the address listed as 125 Virginia. A follow up e-mail to the Fire Department revealed that the property in question was actually 125 Mulberry. The Mulberry property was demolished.
3. All the properties in the sample were examined for proper authorization with the exception of eight properties. These properties had their demolition approvals and other documentation removed by the Justice Department in an ongoing investigation and, as such, were not deemed to be errors. All other properties in the sample had the correct authorizations.
4. Monies for the demolition of structures within the city are from three sources: capital debt funds, block grant funds and funds appropriated from the general fund. The cash generated from the sale of a bond can only be spent on those items clearly listed in the bond resolution. Bond monies have been used to pay for the demolition of fire damaged/destroyed structures "of various City-owned buildings *to provide sites for future neighborhood development.*" As far as can be discovered there is no specific plan for future development that documents what sites within neighborhoods will be developed. There is,

however, an overall Citywide Comprehensive Master Plan that includes monies for new housing and rehabilitation.

5. A review of records from previous years indicates that the time between a fire damaging or destroying a structure and that structure's eventual demolition is increasing. The difference between the date of actual demolition of a property and the date the Fire Department first requested that demolition increased on average from forty-nine to sixty-one days from calendar year 2002 to calendar year 2003. The cause for this delay may be an overall shortage in funding. Other reasons for a delay include the City's bidding process for demolitions, weather, and properties that are isolated from others that are on a group demolition list.

The budget for general fund appropriations for the emergency demolition of structures has been dramatically reduced over the past four fiscal years. In 2003-04 the demolitions budget amounted to \$174,321. In 2000-01 that account was budgeted at \$1,000,000. A reduction in funding effects the timeliness of demolitions for these fire-ravaged properties. That delay in demolition can contribute negatively to the quality of life within the affected neighborhoods.

**Recommendations:**

1. Fire Department employees could check the address against the City's Internet listing of properties. This would be accomplished in the paperwork generated by every fire call. With this step, any paperwork errors would be reduced.
2. Demolitions appear to take longer than necessary to accomplish. These damaged structures harbor rodents, are havens for crime, define the term "inner city blight" and drive down already sinking property values. The current demolition process for these structures is successful with proper funding. Funding is, however, critical.

A plan for the residential rejuvenation of the City's most damaged neighborhoods should be developed. Demolishing fire-ravaged buildings is necessary and appropriate. A Vacant Land and Building committee has produced several reports and continues to review the neighborhood impact.

TYPE DEPARTMENT HEAD NAME:      ANDREW SANFILIPPO

TYPE TITLE:                      COMPTROLLER

SIGNATURE OF DEPARTMENT HEAD

