

1. Abstract of the Program

Neighborhood Enhancement

The Chesterfield County Board of Supervisors, recognizing that older subdivisions bring an increase in the need for revitalization, initiated a neighborhood enhancement program within the Department of Building Inspection. Intended to address areas showing signs of initial decline in property appearance and value, the program targeted over 130 subdivisions in the county's five districts. Inspectors visited all targeted subdivisions, performing an initial evaluation of visible violations that would later serve as the basis for setting thresholds used to prioritize program activity.

The program focuses on older subdivisions meeting certain demographic and census-related criteria, identifying areas most in need of revitalization. Inspections of targeted areas come only after delivery of a pre-inspection notification to each home in a targeted area. The pre-inspection notice lists the most-often discovered violations and serves as a check list for homeowners. This process of pre-notification results in the correction of most violations prior to performance of the actual inspections. During the first eighteen months of the program, 29 subdivisions with over 4,000 houses received inspections.

Before establishing the program, the county's property maintenance code and zoning code enforcement were separate activities, one under the Building Inspection Department and the other under the Planning department. As part of the program, Building Inspection Department staff received training on certain zoning code requirements for subdivisions and combined enforcement of these requirements with property maintenance code requirements during their inspections.

The Neighborhood Enhancement Program team consists of four inspectors and an inspections supervisor. This team, together with other Building Inspection Department staff, designed the program's business processes, as well as assisted with automation of the program. The automation of the program includes flexibility to allow other county departments to adapt its design to similar processes in those departments.

2. The Problem/Need for the Program

Chesterfield County enjoys a wide variety of housing stock ranging from new homes to historical structures. During the 1980's the county experienced rapid growth in housing and the development of subdivisions, resulting in the county being the tenth fastest growing community in the country. However, now with a large group of housing twenty five to thirty years old or older, the county is experiencing a rise in the number of concerns from citizens involving zoning violations and exterior maintenance problems within these neighborhoods. The concerns, left unchecked, contribute to the decline in

the vitality and physical appearance of the neighborhood, and result in reduced property values along with the potential increase in crime. The Building Inspection department responds to property maintenance code violations and the Planning department responds to zoning code violations. Often, this results in each department visiting the same site on the same or different days and addressing the violations through different processes. Each departmental process has different timeframes and regulations for compliance and prosecution, if necessary. In addition, the volume of zoning ordinance concerns has grown significantly and due to the present state of the economy, increasing staff is not a viable option. This problem provided the county with an opportunity to develop a more efficient and effective method to address citizen concerns.

3. Description of the Program:

The Chesterfield County Board of Supervisors, as well as code officials in the Building Inspection Department, recognized that the increasing number of ageing subdivisions in the county necessitated the need for revitalization efforts. In April, 2009 The Board of Supervisors directed the Building Inspection Department to develop a Neighborhood Enhancement program to inspect residential property and enforce compliance with the Virginia Uniform Statewide Building Code, Property Maintenance provisions. The inspections were to be made of the house exterior viewable from the street or right-of-way. In addition, the department was asked to enforce the provisions of the county zoning ordinance by inspecting these same properties for the top six most common zoning violations. Zoning enforcement is normally handled by Planning Department inspectors.

The objectives of the program are:

- To enhance the exterior of older neighborhoods by working with homeowners and tenants to take an interest in their homes and neighborhoods
- To ensure safer housing and improve living conditions
- To sustain neighborhood vitality
- To protect neighborhood property values

The program focuses on subdivisions meeting set criteria indicative of most ageing subdivisions. To qualify for the program, a subdivision must:

- Be over 4 years old
- Have over 20 houses
- Have a rental rate of 20% or higher

- Have a defect rate of 20% or higher of zoning and property maintenance violations, determined by a survey of all qualifying subdivisions.

The inspections conducted as part of the Neighborhood Enhancement program are also referred to as proactive inspections. This program is a departure from the other inspection services offered by the department. Previously all inspections were conducted on a reactive basis as the result of a request for an inspection of new construction from a homeowner or contractor, or a complaint from a citizen regarding an existing structure. Therefore, this program required the development of new manual and automated processes and procedures.

The Property Maintenance team, along with several other staff members, met regularly for 12 weeks to determine a method for choosing the target neighborhoods and to design the process for conducting inspections and recording inspection results. To determine the neighborhoods that would be inspected, inspectors surveyed all county subdivisions meeting the first three criteria, as stated above, to determine a defect rate based on a visual inspection of the exterior of houses, performed from the public road. The team prepared a list of all subdivisions meeting the criteria and having a discovered defect rate of 20% or higher, and prioritized the list from highest to lowest defect rate. Neighborhoods may also be targeted as a result of specific requests from Police, Fire, or neighborhood associations. Examples of exterior maintenance defects include such items as missing or damaged guardrails and handrails for porches, stoops, and decks, and unsecured or obstructed gutters and downspouts. Examples of zoning defects include debris in the yard, and unlicensed or abandoned vehicles.

An important aspect of the process design was to design a door hanger (see Attachment 2) that would be distributed throughout the targeted neighborhood two weeks in advance of inspections. In addition to notifying occupants of the impending inspections, the door hanger specifies what the inspectors will be looking for, thus providing the occupant with an opportunity to correct defects prior to the inspection. In addition, the team designed a method in Excel to track and record the inspections, as well as to generate statistics on the program results. The employees also designed a new Property Maintenance section for the Building Inspection Department website. Several months after the implementation of the program, the team reconvened and designed an automated process using the department's existing workflow tracking and database system, which significantly streamlined the inspection and reporting processes. This automation also enables the inspectors to use field laptop units, which significantly simplifies their work.

There was concern that some homeowners would not be able, either due to physical restrictions or financial hardship, to make the cited repairs. Therefore, the department contacted several non-profits that provide specialized assistance with home maintenance projects.

Prior to fully implementing the Neighborhood Enhancement program the team identified two neighborhoods to inspect as a pilot program. Prior to distributing the door hangers the staff members attended a meeting of the neighborhood homeowner’s association to explain the program. The first neighborhood was inspected in July and August of 2009. In the first 18 months of the program the Building Inspection Department has inspected over 4,000 homes in 29 subdivisions.

4. Use of Technology:

Technology plays a significant role in the successful performance of the Neighborhood Enhancement program. The following pieces of technology are used:

- Microsoft Office – Word, Excel
- POSSE – software and database application for Building Inspection Dept processes
- GIS
- Chesterfield County Dept of BI Website
- PCs
- Field laptop units
- Digital cameras
- Cellular phones

5. The Cost of the Program:

Chesterfield County, Virginia, Property Maintenance Initiative	Personnel + Benefits	Operations	Capital	Quantity	Total
Property Maintenance Inspectors	46,000			2	92,000
Desk/cell phone		540	600	2	2,280
Vehicle/operation (maintenance/gas@\$75/wk)		15,600	20,000	2	71,200
Server/customized property maintenance software		1,200	37,000	1	38,200
Laptop field units with software/printers		500	2,609	2	6,218
Neighborhood notification: door hangers		100	0	1	100
Estimated Total					209,998

6. Results and success of the program

The Neighborhood Enhancement Program has improved the appearance and value of older neighborhoods. Based on the initial surveys of targeted neighborhoods one-third to one-half of the violations were corrected after the initial distribution

of door hangers. Building Inspection staff inspected the exterior of 4,177 houses in 29 neighborhoods for building and zoning violations. As a result, 1,016 houses now meet property maintenance/zoning codes (see Attachment 1).

Prior to entering subdivisions, we distribute an informative door hanger to every home. The information found on this door hanger educates residents and helps them identify exterior building and zoning code violations on their properties and others. The number of people directly educated by our department is much higher than the number of homes inspected because many of the homes inspected are tenant-occupied, thus both tenant and owner are notified of the program.

The program has sparked interest from neighborhood homeowner associations and several have requested the Neighborhood Enhancement Program for their neighborhood. The program continues to have a positive effect on older neighborhoods within the county, through enforcement and education. The number of emails, letters and phone calls we have received from residents thanking us for improving their neighborhood is astounding and helps us realize the positive impact our program and overall presence is having in our county.

7. Worthiness of an Award

This new program was developed to address the emerging need to reverse the decline of aging neighborhoods due to a lack of maintenance to homes and an increased volume of zoning violations. The program combines previously separate functions into one department thereby saving time, money and improving service.

The program success and worthiness is demonstrated by observable improvements to homes within the inspected neighborhoods. These property enhancements increase property values, thereby increasing tax revenue. As important is the positive reaction of the citizens of the neighborhoods inspected. Citizens within the neighborhoods have expressed appreciation of our efforts to improve the appearance of their subdivision. Other homeowner associations aware of the program contact our department to request this program be conducted in their neighborhood.

Additionally, this program saved the county money by transfer of a position from another department. Funding for this program allowed for the development of enhancements to our computer system which records all actions, automates correspondence, and prompts follow-up processes for individual properties. These improvements allow staff to make more efficient use of time and are being considered for other processes within the county.

Success Stories

Before



After



Before



After



Before



After



Before



After



Before



After



Letter of thanks

Bonnie,

I just wanted to drop you a note and tell you how much I appreciate what you are doing for the community in the area surrounding Turner and Belmont Rd in Chesterfield County. I am a Realtor who has sold dozens of homes in that area for the past 14 years, but I have been noticing that lately many of the homes, particularly those non-owner occupied, have been falling in disrepair and others are plainly an eyesore.

This together with the fact that Real Estate has been in a crisis, has severely affected the property values of the area. You had left a note at 6006 Belrun Ct regarding repairs he had to do to his front porch. The property had been for sale at the time and was under contract but right around the time of your note, the buyer backed out.

Making the seller fix the porch inspired him to paint some other trim and detailing in and around the house. It looked so good we raised the price \$5,000 and we received a full price offer yesterday.

Anyway, this is just a story to illustrate that you guys are doing the right thing.

Thanks again

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Department of Building Inspection

Dear Chesterfield Neighbor;

In the coming weeks, inspectors from your Chesterfield County Department of Building Inspection will be visiting your neighborhood to conduct inspections of the exterior of houses and their premises. These inspections are part of your county's efforts to provide a first class community and enhance our neighborhoods, and are being performed to assure that houses meet the minimum standards set out in the Property Maintenance Code and other ordinances. The Property Maintenance Code is a regulation that sets out minimum standards of maintenance for all houses in the county. The majority of houses in most neighborhoods will not be affected by these inspections, since most are maintained within the minimum limits set by the code. If any conditions are found that require attention, the owner of the property will receive a detailed list and explanation of what the owner will need to do to resolve the problems.

Here is some information about items the inspectors will be reviewing during their visits:

- Inspectors will examine the exterior of houses and outbuildings that are viewable from the street and the front yards.
- Examples of the items being inspected that are cause for concern:
 - House Numbers should be visible from the street
 - Improper storage or disposal of trash, garbage, litter, and debris
 - Weeds or grass over 12 inches in height
 - Inoperable, unlicensed and unregistered vehicles
 - Proper parking or storage of recreational vehicles
 - Deteriorating structural members and exterior roof, siding and trim, including peeling paint
 - Unpainted or unprotected raw wood on the exterior
 - Broken windows and doors
 - Unsecured gutters and downspouts
 - Missing or damaged guardrails and handrails for porches, stoops, and decks
 - More than three dogs over four months old without a private kennel license
 - Proper parking of oversized commercial vehicles
 - Pools without proper fences/barriers

Questions? Please contact an inspector
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