

**CODE ENFORCEMENT BOARD
WORKSHOP MEETING
JULY 26TH, 2021**

The City of Lake Wales Code Enforcement Board held an in person meeting on July 26TH, 2021 at 5:30 p.m. in the HR-Planning Conference Room located in the City Administration Building.

ATTENDANCE

**Code Enforcement Board Members
(Shaded area indicates absence):**

| | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------|------------------|------------------|---------------------|---------------|
| Dwight Wilson Chairperson | Ralph Marino Vice-Chair | Sara Jones | Rodney Cannon | Bruce Austell | Courtney Schmitt | Julia Paul |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------|------------------|------------------|---------------------|---------------|

Albert (Chuck) Galloway, Jr. – City Attorney

| |
|--|
| City Staff: Development Services Department |
| Jose Lozada– Code Compliance Officer |
| Fany Lozano – Recording Secretary |
| Mark J. Bennett – Development Services Director |

Presenter : Matt Weidner - Foreclosures

- 1) **CALL TO ORDER** – Meeting called to order at 5:53 pm
- 2) **ROLL CALL** – A quorum was present.
- 3) **APPROVAL OF MINUTES – Regular Meeting – July 12th, 2021**

Mr. Wilson asked for a motion to approve the minutes. Mr. Marino made a motion to approve the minutes. Ms. Jones seconded the motion. All voted in favor, the motion passed unanimously.

Mr. Bennett thanked the Board for being here for a special meeting. He stated that we will be talking a bit about foreclosures tonight, and stated that this is a tool in the toolbox that we can use to accomplish our goals with improving the appearance of the community. He stated that this is something that we are looking into doing more and that we can envision bringing more foreclosure cases to the Board and we thought that there would merit in providing this presentation. He thanked Ms. Lozano for finding out about this through the FACE conference.

4) **WORKSHOP – FORECLOSURES, presenter: Matt Weidner**

Mr. Wilson turned the floor over to Mr. Weidner. Mr. Weidner stated that he is respectful of the work that Code Enforcement does and that it has become a passion of his. He stated that he has done work in St. Pete where there was a concentration of blight. He stated that when he met with the Mayor of St. Pete they decided to start working on vacant lots first and clear up those properties. He stated that the Board is the only one that can do something about the situation with the heirs when people pass away. He stated that in the past he defended home owners on foreclosures. He proceeded to present a presentation in which he spoke about articles which provide support that the solution to blight is foreclosures. He stated that he has changed the community with active code enforcement. He stated that we have an obligation to collect all of the money that has been spent on abatement. He stated that when the Board certifies a lien, they are telling the property owner that they owe the citizens of this community money, we mowed your grass, we fixed your roof, but we are not letting you off free. He stated that when it pertains to code enforcement, we should not keep doing the same things over and over again. We are in an era where we need to go back to overlooked communities, and the Board is now in the business of economic development by using the process of foreclosure. He stated that he loves to see what is happening in a community from the outside and he gets to learn words like Grove Manor Redevelopment and the complex visioning programs. He stated that the plans are really good but executing them becomes really difficult and that the Board has the ability to fund these kind of projects by going after the vacant properties, the vacant dirt. He stated that he looked over the downtown proposal and in particular the northwest neighborhood, and that they identify the things that he sees in every single community which is all these vacant lots, probably in estate names or LLC Names that people have walked away from, and that is it the Board's job as well as Building Services to say that they will make these lots available, so that we can bring back our family or that other people can be part of the community. He stated that what he wants the Board to be thinking about is that those vacant lots are their opportunities to engage in Economic Development to revitalize the community, to draw people out from Tampa and Orlando and Chicago to come build their house here. He stated that the way you do that is to make these lots available for building. He stated that we are not picking on people that are having trouble, but there is plenty of vacant lots or abandoned buildings that already have fines against them, and the owner does not care. He showed the Board before pictures of lots in St. Pete that continued to be in violation and finally the Mayor asked why do we continue to pick up the garbage and why do we keep cutting the grass. He then showed the Board pictures of what those vacant lots looked like after they were developed and they cleared the title and what they found is that they created a marketplace and the areas became more attractive. He stated that when things like this happen the Board empowers Code Enforcement by doing something about these issues, and the reason why they should do something about it is because single family housing is Economic Development. He stated that Lake Wales has the potential to be more desirable and that it will continue to increase and that we need the Board to be able to produce lots to attract the builders to this area. He stated, "you are the cause of a lot of the blight that we see". He stated that what happens is that when someone dies, and the Board attaches a lien against the property, the lien becomes the problem so that when someone wants to buy the house, or if he wants to build, but when they do a title search, all of the liens show up to cloud the title, that someone will walk away and the blight will continue because of the lien. He stated that the Board has an obligation to identify where the liens are, and then they have an obligation to clear those liens. He stated that when the liens are cleared out, you now create clear title that allows

building to happen. He stated that usually when you see an estate or LLC property the City is the only that can do anything about it, because these people usually abandon the property and they do not care and now the burden is on the Board. He stated that when staff brings a vacant lot to certify the lien that is not the end, the end is that staff will report back to them, and staff may have success stories. He stated that there should be community outreach to work with heir properties to clear titles and LLC properties to comply or pay. He talked about the Code Compliance budget and how it can be turned into a positive, but that we must collect on every dime that we spend on mowing and abating. He suggested some action steps, to empower staff and not just certify a lien and never look at it and that they should request staff to provide them with the number and amounts of liens and what actions have been taken on those liens. He proceeded to ask the Board if they have any questions. Mr. Marino stated that he would have liked to have seen a printout of the liens to study them and that he thought the presentation was great and that he enjoyed it. Mr. Marino stated that he thinks the problem is that we have a lot of property owners who are out of state persons who just allow the fines to accrue and then they decide to take the City to court and we get trapped in mediation. Mr. Weidner stated that we have to get ahead of them and be on the offence and not on the defense and that once people in the community start to understand, then they will take care of the problem. He stated that he is not aware of any way that the authority of this Board can be challenged, but that at the end of the day there is a lien out there that the City is entitled to enforce. Mr. Wilson stated that the Seminole Hotel has a lot of character, but it is going to take a lot of money to bring it back, but that it will be a great place for our young talent that is coming back home to have a mixed use for that building. Mr. Wilson also stated that he does not want to see homes not being affordable in our community. Mr. Weidner stated that the Board should get in the mindset that they are part of Economic Development and that they should be sitting at the table with the big shots of Economic Development identifying opportunities. Mr. Bennett stated that he has always struggled because the purpose of Code Enforcement is not property acquisition, it is compliance, but foreclosure is another tool in the toolbox, and that this is something that we are looking at and that we are trying to implement more and more. Mr. Weidner stated that we have identified two problems, someone is giving us a hard time over a lien on a property that is obviously and eye sore on the community, well we need to be affirmative about the, he said. The other problem is bringing back families into the community; he stated that we have the opportunity to create that opportunity for those families with those vacant lots that are in the community. Mr. Bennett stated that we are making good strides in implementing the plans for the City. Mr. Bennett asked Mr. Weidner what he has done in terms of working with non-profits. Mr. Weidner responded that auctions started happening in St. Pete. and then they just shot through the roof at public auction, so the city realized that gentrification was happening, and the way that it could be addressed is by peeling back 5 or 10, that can be turned over to habitat or the builders. Mr. Bennett stated that the CRA has identified about 30 properties that are in estate names and that they have been unsuccessful in generating interest in responses to sell those properties to the City. Mr. Weidner stated that the Heir thing is a problem, and that the heirs forget about their properties, and that sometimes the probate does not stay open and when the children move it, it creates the heir problem with the title. He stated that we have an obligation as the municipality to speak to the community affirmatively with a real process we force them to take action and that is a good thing for the two that want help and the others will be gone. Mr. Wilson stated that he could think of one property where there are 5 or 6 siblings but the siblings butt heads about what each of them want in terms of prices to sell the home. Mr. Wilson asked how can I get my siblings to understand. Mr. Weidner stated that the force of the legal process determines what the number is

and that the number is usually determined by the judge. Mr. Cannon stated, "but if there is no lien and there is no violation, the city has no say". Mr. Weidner responded correct and that is an area where you can get into other economic incentives like waiving permit or application fees. Ms. Jones stated that the CDC has an heirs program, and that they will be targeting those properties that do not have liens on them to try to incentivize the owners to put those properties back into the economy, or redevelop or sell those properties to developers, or people who want to develop so that growth of the area can be stimulated economically. Mr. Weidner stated that he would love to speak to that group as well. Mr. Wilson stated that community outreach will be crucial to how this is perceived. Mr. Weidner stated that we have an obligation to say that we overlooked some areas, and that this is a way to do good work and it will generate money and it will create opportunity for communities that have suffered for a long time. Mr. Bennet stated that we are making progress especially on B Street. Ms. Jones stated that when people understand that doing nothing is not an option they will often move and it helps. Mr. Lozada stated that this is such a great tool because staff comes across many properties that over the years have had so many liens just accumulate and they are still out of compliance, and we are at the point of what do we do with these properties because we cannot put another lien on it. Mr. Weidner closed his presentation and offered to come back any time to speak to the Board again or any other group. Mr. Wilson stated that he sees a lot of positive energy.

5) PUBLIC COMMENTS AND PETITIONS

Mr. Wilson opened the floor for public comments. There was no one in the audience to make public comments.

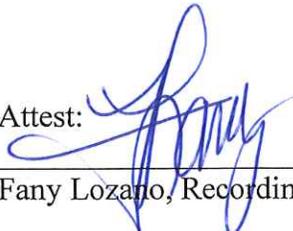
6) BOARD/STAFF COMMENTS/OTHER BUSINESS

Mr. Bennett thanked Ms. Lozano for organizing the workshop tonight and thanked the Board for their time.

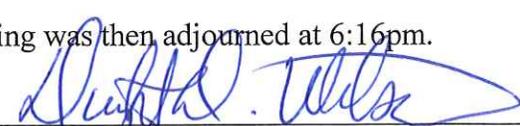
7) ADJOURNMENT

With no further business to discuss, the meeting was then adjourned at 6:16pm.

Attest:



Fany Lozano, Recording Secretary



Dwight Wilson, Chairperson or
Ralph Marino, Vice Chairperson