



Presentation Title: Distressed Properties Initiative

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I. Formative Evaluation – Planning

Distressed properties create costly safety and enforcement problems in communities across the country, while also contributing to long-term neighbourhood decline. Surrey took action on distressed properties after seeing an increase in fires in abandoned homes, which also become targets for vandalism, drug use, squatting, drug production, prostitution, and other illegal activities. In the years leading up to the program, abandoned homes were causing hundreds of visits each year by bylaw and fire personnel, and an average of almost three fires per month.

The Distressed Properties Initiative resulted from the 2016 study [Distressed Properties: Pathways of Decline and the Emergence of Public Safety Risk](#) from the University of the Fraser Valley (UFV) in B.C. The study researched that distressed cities, neighbourhoods and their inhabitants suffer from a disproportionate share of social and economic malaise relative to healthy and resilient cities and neighbourhoods, and vulnerable people tend to consume a larger share of government services in distressed places.

The goals of the Distressed Property Initiative are to identify vulnerable residential properties for prevention, treatment, problem management, and evaluation:

1. Take the long view and address future risk;
2. Treat residential properties before they decline;
3. Prevent the emergence of abandoned residential properties, and
4. Leverage data-driven solutions to predict risk.

Surrey has to date secured more than 600 distressed properties, reduced related fires by up to two-thirds, and recouped over \$1.75m from property owners through its Distressed Properties Initiative. Since January 2018, the program forces property owners to either secure their property or pay the city to do it for them. Cost-recovery is 100 per cent. Owner responsibility is at the heart of the initiative. Leveraging tools that are available to all cities – fire codes and bylaws – ensures taxpayers at large don't pay the cost when owners ignore their responsibilities while making our community safer for everyone.

II. Process Evaluation – Implementation

Based on recommendations from the study, Surrey developed a method to identify vacant or abandoned properties and created bylaws to encourage owners to secure their properties. The Community Property Safety Team (CPST) is alerted of possible abandoned homes by fire and city personnel as they go about their work, as well as by members of the public following a community outreach program. The team has four stages of response:

1. Identified properties receive a visual inspection from the street and receive to one of four categories – stable, vulnerable, stressed or distressed. Vulnerable properties are flagged for monitoring.

2. Owners of stressed and distressed properties are sent a Notice of Inspection by registered mail, and an Order to Remedy Conditions is issued, including a date for compliance and an information package.
3. A re-inspection of the property occurs. If the owner did not comply, the city hires a contractor to install the security measures and bills the owner. The building division receives notification that the structure requires an inspection and permits before it can be re-occupied. Re-inspection cost recovery fees are attached to this and each subsequent inspection. Non-payment is referred to property taxes.
4. Ongoing monthly re-inspections occur until the structure is demolished or renovated, or until further enforcement is required. If there is a breach of the site, the owner is required to install a security system with a security guard runner. Progressive security measures are required to address additional breaches. The building division offers guidance on required permits and inspections for owners wishing to re-invest the property

III. Impact Evaluation – Short-Term Results

From the period of January 2018 – December 2019, CPST identified 611 distressed property owners.

In that time, 338 structures were demolished, 160 were secured, and 73 were renovated and returned to the housing stock.

During that time, the City cost-recovered \$355,000 in re-inspection fees, \$175,000 in administrative fees and \$1,777,000 for contractor payments.

IV. Outcome Evaluation – Long-Term Results

Since the launch of the Initiative in January 2018, the trend of vacant/abandoned structure fires has decreased from an average of almost 3 per month from 2014-2017 to less than one. In 2016 there were 32 vacant/abandoned structure fires; in 2019, there were 12.

The Surrey Fire Service has prevented more than 25 structure fires that might otherwise have occurred during 2018 and 2019. In addition to reduced exposure to injury and occupational illness for Surrey firefighters, the elimination of distressed properties has also reduced calls for service from the ambulance service, the police and bylaw enforcement officers.

Property values are preserved in neighbourhoods which no longer contain distressed properties, and community health and safety are enhanced.

Conclusions:

Evaluation of experience from the CPST has revealed a high correlation between known homeless activity and older buildings. The team is focussing its efforts on where these two factors are present to maximize the effectiveness of their actions. Research is currently underway to analyze the impact of development proposals on the rate of vacant properties to better understand what prevention opportunities might exist. Consideration is also given to quantify the cost of homelessness in the community as it impacts the environment in neighbourhoods where vacant /abandoned properties exist.