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To save or not to save challenge for city inspectors



David Breed

"In most cases, we look at the structure, photograph the evidence and determine whether the building has anything that can be salvaged."

By NATALIE MIKLES World Staff Writer 12/11/2002 Last Modified: 2/25/2008 7:27 AM

Complaints of abandoned, unkempt or nuisance-ridden homes keep Tulsa's neighborhood inspectors busy.

Since March, more than 300 demolition-related complaints have been filed regarding homes in the city of Tulsa. Of those, there

are currently 208 open cases. Cases are typically closed as a result of either owner rehabilitation or demolition.

"We would much rather have a refurbished house than tear one down. It is much better for the neighborhood," said Neighborhood Inspector Steve Harris. "Our general statement is we'll work with them as long as they'll let us."

Neighborhood Inspector Russell Gray said a typical month ends with 28 closed cases. Forty-six percent of those cases are a result of owner rehabilitation. Gray said the city works to raise that number each month, preferring to see rehabilitation over demolition.

The city's neighborhood inspections department classifies its complaints and cases into two zones. Zone One encompasses all homes north of Admiral Boulevard and Zone Two encompasses all homes to the south of Admiral Boulevard.

Every home that the city's neighborhood inspections office recommends for demolition is reviewed by the Tulsa Preservation Commission. The commission makes a recommendation as to the level of historical viability of the home.

"Usually demolition cases involve small, older structures that are marginal in the scope of historical significance. But we do come across some that have historical significance or that sit in historical neighborhoods," said David Breed, vice chairman of the Tulsa Preservation Commission's community group.

"We have seen very few (recommended demolitions) in areas like Yorktown or Maple Ridge. But we have seen a few in Brady Heights. The interest of the people in the area is a big factor, and is what saved some of those homes in Brady Heights," Breed said.

Breed said homes that are typically recommended for demolition are hazardous, shaky or

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abandoned structures.

Among the issues considered before demolition, is the historical significance of the structure. Historical significance is considered in all of the city's demolition cases, Breed said.

David Simmons, planner for the Tulsa Preservation Commission staff, said most demolition requests are issued because of unsound and unsecured structures.

Harris said most of the neighborhood inspections office's investigations begin from a tip from either the police or fire department. Police and firefighters, he said, have some of the best vantage points for checking areas for unsafe structures. Complaints are also often filed from neighbors, he said.

"The areas where we see a lot more (demolition requests) are the older areas surrounding downtown," Breed said.

"The area just to the northwest of downtown offers some wonderful examples of some of Tulsa's oldest residential architecture, but it's so neglected, there's an extensive amount of neglect in the area. But the homes do have historical significance. They're not the mansions of Maple Ridge, but they are historical," Breed said.

Breed said it is the Tulsa Preservation Commission's responsibility to seek ways to preserve such areas of historical significance, as well as to determine such significance.

Though the commission reviews all proposed demolitions, it is most often those that signal a question of historical value that the commission investigates.

"In most cases, we look at the structure, photograph the evidence and determine whether the building has anything that can be salvaged," Breed said.

"Many of the cases occur when a grandparent passes away. They might have lived in the house for 60 or more years, and as they get older, their ability to care for their property decreases. The children and grandchildren who sometimes inherit the property find it isn't cost effective to refurbish the home," he said.

As a result, some of these homes are either rented out or left abandoned, Breed said.

However, as more interest in Tulsa's historic neighborhoods continues, Breed said he hopes that fewer homes will face demolition.

The Yorktown neighborhood, in particular, has seen a lot of interest from those looking for a traditional Wooden Craftsman home, he said.

Many of the homes, he said, offer modern amenities or offer the capability for such amenities to be added.

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By NATALIE MIKLES World Staff Writer

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