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Rawlings-Blake Launches New Plan to Tackle Baltimore Blight

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Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake has announced an elaborate strategy to tackle the city's vacant properties and reduce blight. The plan calls for a streamlined sales process of vacant structures, stricter code enforcements for slumlords and tax incentives to entice more homebuyers and developers to invest in the 16,800 vacant properties that loom in the city.

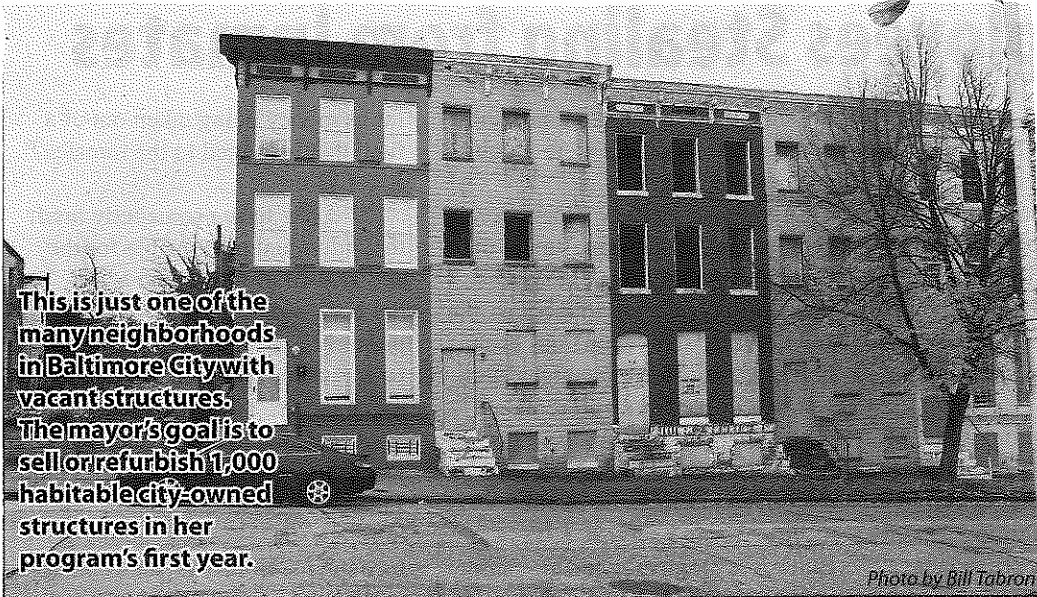
These thousands of tenantless homes are not just abandoned properties, but dilapidated eyesores, says Matthew Kachura, program manager for the local databank, Baltimore Neighborhood Indicator's Alliance. Boarded

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up structures are scattered throughout the city but are highly concentrated in certain neighborhoods. According to Kachura's data, Perkins Middle East and Greenmount East top the list of Baltimore neighborhoods with the most vacant properties.

The mayor's new plan will be the most

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This is just one of the many neighborhoods in Baltimore City with vacant structures. The mayor's goal is to sell or refurbish 1,000 habitable city-owned structures in her program's first year.

Photo by Bill Tabron

Baltimore Blight

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ambitious blight elimination program to date, says the Mayor's office, because it calls for the newly restructured Baltimore Housing group to sell or refurbish 1,000 inhabitable city-owned structures within the program's first year.

"The simple truth is that urban blight in Baltimore is a problem of too much supply and not enough demand," said Rawlings-Blake in a written statement. "That's why the six-point plan to address blight recognizes and respects the role of the marketplace, and ensures that city government is positioned to facilitate and drive targeted reinvestment."

Included in the multi-platform strategy is the allocation of over \$1 million in homebuyer incentives. Special five-year loans for city police, firefighters and teachers who invest in abandoned homes will also be available. New code enforcements will hold slumlords and speculators accountable to stricter guidelines. They will face \$900 fines if they refuse to commence rehabilitation of their properties.

David Borinsky, the executive director of Bridge Private Lending, a group devoted to funding the construction of green homes in Baltimore, said he looks forward to the expedited sales process and new appraisal guidelines — policies the mayor says will reduce transaction time by two thirds.

"Before (this new plan) you could win a bid for a house and be stuck with a price that wasn't what you originally bid for," said

Borinsky. "The process was not connected to reality... When lenders wanted to initiate neighborhood developments, the pricing system was so awkward and time consuming. It was just poorly designed."

He said the Mayor's new "Vacants to Value" appears to be a solid program.

"Markets and investors need and deserve more transparency and predictability with these transactions," said Rawlings-Blake. "With these new policies in place, they will have it."

More than 5,700 of the city's vacant buildings are in high or promising development demand areas, according to Baltimore Housing data, but the mayor's new plan will also target structures that reside in low demand neighborhoods. In these areas, the city will employ strategies to raze properties, consider boarding and cleaning or invest in other "creative interim uses including new community green space."

Rawlings-Blake says her administration will work hard to spur a reinvestment in Baltimore's homes.

"City government will get its own house in order so that we can efficiently dispose of City-owned property and get it into the hands of those both willing and able to renovate and invest," she said.

In the coming weeks, the mayor will host an open forum for community input on the new "Vacants to Value" initiative.