

Owner Occupied Property Maintenance
First Focus Group
Saturday, January 24 2009

What Factors make a good neighborhood?

- Meeting and getting to know your neighbors
- Having relationships, taking care of each other
- Tolerance, different people want to do things different ways
- Schools, a feeling of community having common space to meet
- Balance between owner occupied and rental homes
- Pedestrian friendly neighborhoods where people can get to know each other
 - Close proximity to retail or services
- College community
- Living for the good of the community – respecting each other
- Home tours
 - Pride in property
- Balance between renters and owners
- Diversity

City's Role

- Don't close schools. Neighborhood schools provide common space, green space, and focus
- Allow an integration of retail and restaurants within a neighborhood. Small stores and restaurants shouldn't require large asphalt slabs for parking. To be able to walk to a neighborhood restaurant, coffee shop, or small market it preferable to having to drive everywhere. The City planning model of the last 30 years is a failure and should be significantly revised.
- Relax zoning for unique business opportunities
 - Allow neighborhood daycares

Issues on property maintenance

- The City as of late has been very responsive. We simply do not have the ordinance to address the problems with properties in Ames.
- The house next to me is literally falling apart. This should not happen in a community like Ames.
- The City should be able to address really truly aesthetic eyesores.
- Don't dictate house color.
- The historic district has ridiculous regulations. This is an example of City regulations carried to extremes. Strictly enforced, overly rigid regulations by overzealous board members make me doubtful that the City can keep its codes in moderation.
- Some property maintenance issues are because of low income. The City will have to have a plan to address property maintenance in low income households.
- Problems with subjective regulations
- Where are you going to draw the line?
- Who's going to decide what is a violation?

- The City should adopt guides versus rules.
- The City should deal with extreme cases and the most egregious violations.
- The City has to address impact of bad properties on surrounding property values.
- The City should set aside funds for low income assistance..
- City responds now, but no ordinance to address concerns
- Absentee owners let property deteriorate
- Must be complaint driven
- Iowa State University/City of Ames sponsor “Day of Service” to assist with compliance
- Code necessary due to negative impact on property values
- Health and safety issues would necessitate codes
 - Interpretation of health/safety?
- It’s wrong to establish a policy for everyone when only a few are causing issues
 - Unanticipated consequences of those policies

Why should the City pursue a property maintenance code?

- The City should deal with egregious violations and don’t adversely affect everyone else.
- The City should establish a citizen board for appeals.
- The City should organize volunteers and neighbors to address problems.
- The City should only adopt codes after other attempts fail.
- The City has to adopt codes to have some teeth.
- The City should enforce the codes, not the neighbors. We do not want to be the bad guy.
- This is the role of local government.
- Equity. If it is fair to do this on rental units, it is fair to do it on all other properties.
- Code should be balanced
- Allow a variety – unpaved driveways, for example
- Codes should be not be used to address the symptoms, but should address the cause of problem properties
- Why codes? Maybe neighbors should pull together and address issues
- Volunteers should help neighbors with property maintenance
- Rental units are better maintained because more rules
- Codes are important
- Codes should only be enforced in worst-case situations and assistance should be offered
- Maintain property values

Why would residents object to a property maintenance code?

- May interfere with building relationships with neighbors.
- These rules will affect the personal freedoms of property owners.
- Rules take on a life of their own and often become overly severe and punitive over time. This will affect everyone.
- This will reduce friction between neighbors that live by excessive situations.
- This may increase friction between neighbors in minor cases.
- The codes may be too subjective.
- I don’t want anyone else’s taste enforced on me.
- This may have a bad economic impact on a property owner.

- Different opinions on what is acceptable
 - Some people would mow neighbor's lawn if it got too long
 - Some people not bothered by tall grass
 - Some people don't like tall grass
- Environmental concerns
 - Overuse of chemicals
 - Allow for rain gardens
 - Allow for native grasses
- Need to be tolerant of variety
- Need time to transition to new standards
- No code – have a board listen to individual cases
- What would the code look like?
 - Once it's out there, hard to get rid of it.
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How can the City overcome the objections to property maintenance codes?

- Do not conduct inspections of private property. Deal with complaints only.
- Provide transition period (reasonable time to comply)
 - Adopt the codes and allow a generous time period before they are implemented to allow citizens to prepare for their enforcement.
- When a violation is noted, allow adequate time to comply.
- Make funds available for the City to help with property maintenance.
- The City should not take any enforcement against private households, but the City may provide a mediation group to deal with disputes between neighbors.
- Provide education and information
- Start with issues that have the most agreement
- Safety – not aesthetics
- Do residents trust the City?

What could be the best policy possible?

- Learn from other cities
- Community-based codes, not cookie cutter. Get input from residents
- Be more supportive of neighborhoods – strong neighborhoods eliminate many of these problems
- Look at the International Property Maintenance Code first – as a starting point
- Begin with the least intrusive codes and apply fairly
- “Loose” interpretation of code
 - Least restrictive
 - Hard to draw the line, but some lines need to be drawn
- Address the extreme/worst offenders
- Develop something enforceable and clear, and something that empowers neighbors
- Take into account economic reality and special circumstances
- Develop a code based on strengths not on weaknesses; motivate property owners to do better.

Owner Occupied Property Maintenance
Second Focus Group
Tuesday, January 27 2009

What do you feel makes a good neighborhood? Question asked around the table to each person individually.

- Cleanliness and good neighborhood
- Watching out for each other and helping people that can't help themselves.
- Clean and Quite
 - Well kept up homes
 - Well maintained
- Routine size ranch.
 - Homes not being very big or too small. (not sure what this person meant by this)
 - New people might not know what is expected from them.
 - Block Party people organizers are needed (maybe to get people together and have a more cohesive neighborhood).
- Property owners need to be expected to be more responsible for their homes.
- Need to teach the young people the concept of neighborly.
 - People first.
- Neighborhoods are the people not the houses.
- Safety for young kids
 - Without inflicting on the property rights
- Most part people do well throughout the City of Ames
- Where people feel safe and clean.
- Its all a give and take
 - Not always put people first there has to be balance
- Consensus building to develop some of that stuff.
 - Safety
 - Broken sidewalks
 - Minimum regulations

Condition of Property

Home value; eye sore items:

Questions brought up by neighbors:

- What happens when the neighbor does not make an attempt to fix it?
- If there is a person resistant to change and fix up their stuff. Not willing to accept help, etc. This might create neighborhood tensions
- The most important is the first approach to the problems and understanding the person's main conflict with cleaning up his property.

Word associated with CODE

- Written set of rules to abide by
- Fees
- Standards for the industry
- Rules

- Safety
- Qualitative considerations
- Restrictions
- Intent is protection of or for something.

What should be the Cities Role in property maintenance?

- Peeling homes from paint – not important to many.
 - If siding is coming out then yes it's a problem.
- How do we (or the City) go about the recycle of homes?
- Rental should be held to higher standards because they are profit motivated.
 - Something Clint mentioned to me as an important point to write.
- Re-train landlords in helping the tenant's upkeep property as well as the job that the property owner currently does.

Regarding Junk and inoperable vehicles

- Since junk cars can be moved easily they should be moved, unlike a home. You will not make anyone homeless if you move the car.
- Create a system; if a car does not move for 3 months or X period they need to find a new home for that car.
- Make the vehicles be licensed every year.
- Side yards should not be used to park vehicles.

Grass and Weed control. What the focus group's thoughts?

- If there is a pest infestation problem then it should be addressed.
- Aesthetics is so individual that we can not create a template and say that certain things are not aesthetically pleasing.
- Limit the height of paramecia weeds.
- Prairie grass and weeks does not bother me.
- When the neighborhoods long grass is having ground squirrels, rabbits, rats, etc might bring the snakes as well that that is not safe for kids.
- If weeds are too high they might affect my lawn and that is not ok

Out Buildings and Sheds.

- There is little the city can do to help this situation, if the city will fine the property owner this will further affect the possibility of this person to be able to bring it down.
- If it becomes a liability and a possible liability claim they have to come down.
- If it is in poor conditions and the about to fall the inspector should come and check the structural integrity of it. If it does not meet requirements then the City can require owner to bring it down.

Reasons for support – Agree with having a code in place

- People want to be proud of the place they live in and this will help achieve that goal.
- When people are proud of their community they will give back to it.
- Take some of the responsibility form the people.
- Get the landlords more in touch with tenants ad

- Turn over of people and need to keep it that “nice” community like.
- General (minimal) standards are needed.
- Exception codes need to be placed as well.
- There is something to fall back if there is a code.
- Maybe to create a group that would help the people that need help. Volunteer organizations type thing.
- People that enforce the code need to address if people need the extra help and if so find a group that would address their issues.
- Christmas in April concept where volunteer group or a family would help someone elderly clean their yard, landscaping, painting, and etc. small projects.
- Spring Cleanup concept NEEDED.
- Home inspector can guide people to the right help (contractors) and help educate rather than demand.

Reasons for NO Support. Oppose

- Poverty: money and capability
- Property Rights
- Can become finger pointer situations
- Current in place restricted
- Where are the resources going to come from within the City to do this?
- Have variety in homes and not all the homes be the same.
- If we put this in place where does it stop? Incremental policy restrictions.
- Currently the Neighborhood Associations have been used for peer pressure and has worked in the past. The neighbor next door will know better what is going on with this house and the owner than an inspector would.
- Create a program that would allow new home buyers update home giving them time to fix up problems and tax incentives.
- Program Registry for matchmaking: for disabled & elderly. This can suffice the need for property maintenance and volunteer groups and finding the adequate connections.
- Range of Help in neighborhoods
 - Walking/ exercise groups can go around with trash bags and pick up sidewalk trash.
 - Etc.
- Need stronger NA they can help more than anything.
- New owner information package.

What would you consider the best policy would be?

- Guiding philosophy
- Thing that protect / safety
- Having something to fall back to if problem become excessive and is needed to be addressed legally.
- Need minimal standards
- Encourage responsible action.
- Universal code rental & owner.
- No beautification code just create it for safety
- What about resources of the City, etc.

Owner Occupied Property Maintenance

Third Focus Group

Tuesday, January 27 2009

What Factors make a good neighborhood?

- Work together to get the neighborhood and take care of it. People will try to mimic the neighbor in most cases to get a sense of unity.
- Know people and neighbors
 - Can use it as a tool to do several things in the community besides taking care of your neighborhood. It can go beyond that.
- Take care of each other
 - Look out for each other without being too involved
- When people take care and pride of their property
- Diversity within the neighborhood of people and home appearance.
- No uniformity and up kept homes.
 - Liberty within reason
- Diversity and safety
- Sidewalks
 - Ice and snow
 - Tree branches
 - Cracked sidewalks

City's Role

- Taking care of property is a stewardship of the owner and not the cities responsibility.
- There should be a standard to not allow neighbors to diminish your land value.
 - Paint peeling off houses
 - Weeds, junk cars, yard waste
- Enforcement so people don't fertilized lawns.
 - Blue grass
- Neighbor should be able to address issues without the city's involvement.
- Listening to the concerns of the neighbors but following up with the Neighborhood associations
- Enforcement of Codes
 - Junk Cars, Etc
- More flexible for owners because owner is ultimately responsible for their property
- Code for abandoned property
 - What does a city do about that?
- Sometimes the neighbors are complicated or have mental health issues and the city needs to set up and help the neighbors mitigate the problem

Issues on property maintenance

- Eye sore junk and stuff on front yard
 - Carpets, couches, trash, etc
- There is always an outlier in the neighborhood and can create problems and tension throughout the neighborhoods

- Concerns about property value, strange things going on, there is a need to avoid these situations
- People might have trouble accepting help or that their yard is a problem
 - Some cases cant help them by talk
 - So this is why the city needs to come in and fix things.

Junk Cars

- An agreement that this is not an acceptable thing though out the focus group
- All the cars shown on the pictures are a problem and need to be removed.
- Cars on the side of the house are not acceptable.

Grass

- Some saw problems with the high grass because of safety of creating a home for rodents, etc.
- Others did not feel it was a problem and should be able to leave people do what the would like with their yard.
- Both side of the spectrum

Garage, Outhouse, Shed

- A consensus for the group that this is not acceptable and the city needs to come in and make sure this is a safe structure and if not then it needs to come down.

Paint

- Peeling homes deteriorates the value of the surrounding homes and neighborhood
- In side the house it could have been a meth house and the chemicals are still in the house and there needs to be a disclosure when the property exchanges owners.

Why would people be interested in the city have a more active role in property maintenance?

Agree to have a code

- For general beauty/ aesthetics
- Property values
- Safety
- When properties are left to deteriorate it affects the peoples surrounding in their behaviors (become more deviant)
- property maintained gives a sense of community
- visitors would like to come live in Ames and this might create more business to move to Ames as well
- Reason to have a code is to up keep the current housing stock.

Disagree or object to have a code for property maintenance

- Cost to the City of Ames
- Cost to owner (cant afford improvements)
- Freedom infringements
- Individualism
- Physical constrains on owner to fix problems
- Diversity in housing and population
- Volunteer group/ offer help to fix

If the neighborhood has: it's a problem

- Number of cars on houses and streets
- Make sure the information is available to the community both to the new and old residents.
- Look into how to live in a community by ISU was a package provided by Iowa State University, for tenants and working together with new neighbors
- The City could create a similar thing.
 - How to approach problems important
- Work through the Neighborhood association if possible to solve problems.

What could be the best policy possible?

- Snow removal of paths and sidewalks & no mowing of grass
- Policy that allows flexibility but have some standards that keep the whole city in good standards.
- Upkeep structure integrity of buildings outside and in. If doors are falling off or if siding is rotting or broken it needs to be fixed.
- Something that would improve social networking helping people in need and improving the overall appearance of the community without becoming too restrictive.