

**STAFF REPORT**  
**Volunteer Program for Property Maintenance**  
**April 14, 2009**

One aspect of public input not covered at the City Council property maintenance code workshop on March 30, 2009 was how to assist those homeowners who are unable to do the required maintenance due to income, age, or disability. This input led staff to conclude that a complete local policy for residential property maintenance should include three elements: The code itself, an appeals process, and community assistance for property owners who themselves are unable to comply with the code. Filling others' need for assistance is also an opportunity to strengthen neighborhoods by facilitating neighbors helping each other.

In response to this input received through the property maintenance code input steps, staff has explored program options that could help meet this need. Exploration has included discovering what other communities are doing, discussion with the Story County Volunteer Center ([www.vcstory.org](http://www.vcstory.org)), and making contacts with Iowa State University student service groups. It may be feasible to partner with these and other local organizations to initiate a volunteer program to help needy homeowners comply with a property maintenance code.

Such a program would have several purposes to address the City Council's goal of strengthening our neighborhoods. One is to provide homeowners and neighbors opportunities to work together to maintain and improve the condition of residential, owner-occupied properties. Another is to provide residents with enriching experiences working together to make a difference in their own neighborhoods and community. A third is to strengthen the social fabric within neighborhoods.

This type of program could match people who need assistance improving their properties with volunteers who are willing to help with exterior property maintenance. Drawn from the list of property maintenance issues being considered for a new property maintenance code, the following activities are examples of the type of work volunteers could help with:

- Clean up of yard debris and outdoor storage
- Trim trees and bushes
- Paint minor areas
- Remove snow
- Repair or install exterior handrails and guardrails
- Mow tall grass and control weeds

## **Potential Resources**

Representatives of the Story County Volunteer Center and Iowa State University student groups expressed interest in such a program. These organizations and the City of Ames could solicit participation from:

- Neighborhood associations
- Other neighborhoods
- Faith groups
- Youth groups
- Student groups
- Service clubs and volunteer organizations
- Individuals

The Story County Volunteer Center offered to match the needs of property owners with the skills of volunteers. The Volunteer Center can also organize the volunteers and partner with volunteer groups to undertake several projects at the same time. Consistent with the goal to strengthen our neighborhoods, to solicit volunteers the Volunteer Center would first contact any designated representative of the neighborhood in which a property with identified maintenance needs is located. The City's role would be to refer people to the program when property maintenance code violations are found.

If a local neighborhood association cannot meet the needs for assistance, other volunteer groups and individuals would be contacted to fill this gap. In these cases, the City's roles would be to define eligibility for assistance and establish a process for determining who is eligible and refer people to the program.

## **Potential Financial Resources**

To help such a volunteer program work, supplies and tools may be needed. Some of the work needed to meet the property maintenance code – possibly much more than the short list above – may require a qualified contractor. Potential sources of financial support could include the following:

- Neighborhood Improvement Grants
- Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) programs for low income homeowner rehabilitation
- A nonprofit organization to receive donations from individuals or groups (Story County Volunteer Center or another existing or new organization)
- Grants from foundations
- Paint Iowa (a program of Diamond-Vogel Paint Company)
- Partnership with local business and other private organizations

As is noted above, people with low or moderate incomes may be able to apply for the Home Improvement Program, a CDBG program that was presented to the City Council in January. The program now being formulated for this year and next will serve those

who meet federal guidelines and provide no-interest loans to pay qualified contractors to make certain types of home improvements.

### **Conclusion**

A few communities in Iowa and beyond have programs to help neighbors (people with disabilities, seniors or people in need) with property maintenance. Some of these programs provide other kinds of help to neighbors; and some are part of a larger effort to maintain, improve and beautify neighborhoods, public spaces, city entrances or the whole community.

An Ames volunteer program should start small and then incrementally increase the scope of the program if funding and volunteer assistance is available. A neighborhood that is well organized and has active volunteers with a common goal could initiate a comprehensive, neighborhood-wide program to improve all properties that do not meet a new property maintenance code.

Such a volunteer program could be one element of a successful property maintenance program and foster neighbor-to-neighbor connections. Depending on City Council's decision on property maintenance codes, it may want to direct staff to work with other interested groups to develop a more detailed volunteer assistance proposal for consideration by City Council in the future.