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Department of Planning & Housing

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TO: Honorable Mayor and City Council
Neighborhood Representatives

FROM: Jeffrey Benson, Neighborhood Liaison

DATE: December 11, 2009

SUBJECT: Staff Report Ames Repair and Care

One of the agenda items for the Neighborhood Summit on December 15 is “Repair and Care” Program. The City Council directed staff to prepare this report following suggestions from the public input meetings on residential property maintenance, which were held last January. This report describes some ways in which the community can work together to improve the condition of some residences. Staff will make a presentation on the details of these programs. Then there will be an opportunity for questions and discussion on the value of the program and the interest of our neighborhoods in participating.

Staff Report

Ames Repair & Care Program

In March 2009, when the City Council began to consider possible requirements for maintenance of private residential properties, it identified the need for assistance for those who are unable to do required maintenance due to age, disability or lack of financial resources. City staff presented some information about potential resources to meet those needs. The Council directed staff to work with other interested groups to develop the following program proposal.

Staff of the City and the Volunteer Center of Story County examined the needs and programs of other communities to meet the needs. A similar program, Partners-in-Care in Maryland (<http://www.partnersincare.org/>) was especially relevant. The mission of this non-profit group is to empower older adults to remain independent in their own homes by providing rides, home repairs, advocacy, and safety. Staff was able to meet with a former volunteer for this program who recently moved back to Ames. These conclusions were drawn from this examination:

- Start small, providing minor repairs that average, able-bodied people can perform, such as raking leaves, controlling weeds, and removing brush, junk and trash.
- Create options for assisting homeowner, because some may feel uncomfortable taking help from neighbors.
- Homeowners who have the need must request the assistance, either on their own or upon referral by City staff investigating possible City code violations.
- Keep track of properties served in order to demonstrate success and help prevent the program from being abused.
- Public exposure is important for getting service to those in need of assistance.

Ames Repair and Care

Staff is proposing a program that incorporates these concepts. The program would be called “Ames Repair and Care.” Starting small, in the beginning Ames Repair and Care would offer only the following work activities:

- Removing yard debris and outdoor storage
- Trimming trees and shrubs
- Mowing tall grass and controlling weeds
- Removing snow
- Minor painting
- Repairing or installing exterior handrails and guardrails

The program would meet several purposes:

- Provide assistance to those who would not otherwise be able to maintain their residences due to age, disability or lack of financial resources
- Where possible, avoid citations for nuisance or maintenance violations and their cost.
- Provide neighbors opportunities to work together to maintain and improve the condition of residential, owner-occupied property.
- Assist neighbors in enriching experiences working together to make a difference in their neighborhoods and community.

To meet these purposes and provide options for assisting homeowner, Ames Repair and Care includes three program elements:

- **Volunteers Repair and Care**
- **Neighborhoods Repair and Care**
- **Clubs Repair and Care**

Each program element is described below.

Volunteers Repair and Care

Most people maintain their residences. Sometimes people seek help from relatives, friends, groups they belong to and neighbors. However, some people do not maintain their residences adequately. When the residence deteriorates to a condition that violates city codes and the city becomes aware of it, staff of the City of Ames Inspections Division investigates and informs the owner that the code violation will lead to a citation if the maintenance is not carried out. The “Volunteers Repair and Care” program element can help the owner comply with the city codes and avoid the citation. Either on their own or upon referral by the City Inspector, the property owner can apply for the Volunteers Repair and Care program. The Volunteer Center of Story County would identify volunteers who can do the needed maintenance work and coordinate as needed with the volunteer and the City Inspector so that the work is completed according to city codes.

This program is intended to assist only those that need help due to age, disability or lack of financial resources. The Neighborhoods Inspector and/or Neighborhood Liaison will determine that the homeowner is eligible before referring the case to the Volunteer Center of Story County. The application form will also clearly state the program purposes and guidelines. This honor system worked well for the Partners-in-Care program, referred to above as an example. However, if problems do develop and volunteers find themselves doing work for people who could do it for themselves, the volunteers could become reluctant to participate. Therefore, the use of the program will be monitored and volunteer feedback will be welcomed. If needed, a more formal application process could be considered in the future. Note that the Volunteers Repair and Care program as proposed here does not use city resources. If City staff determines that the applicant is eligible, it refers the case to the Volunteer Center of Story County. Otherwise, the staff does what it normally does to make sure that the repair work complies with city code.

Next steps: The City of Ames Neighborhood Inspector has already referred a few cases being investigated for code violation to the Volunteer Center of Story County. Volunteers helped complete the needed work and citations were avoided.

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Neighbors can help by registering as a volunteer with the Volunteer Center Story County. By enlisting as a volunteer with the Volunteer Center, volunteers can choose to participate in various projects throughout the community and will not be limited to a particular neighborhood. Some property owners need volunteer help but are reluctant to ask for it or even accept it, perhaps especially if the help is to come from a neighbor. The Volunteer Repair and Care program can still assist those property owners by drawing on volunteers from elsewhere in the community.

Neighborhoods Repair and Care

Another element of Ames Repair and Care is “Neighborhoods Repair and Care,” which helps a whole neighborhood work together to maintain and improve the condition of residential, owner-occupied property. Neighborhoods Repair and Care promotes these enriching experiences and makes a difference in neighborhoods and in the community. City staff will help neighborhood residences to organize one or more events or “work days” when all interested residents help each other with property maintenance.

To initiate a Neighborhoods Repair and Care program, a neighborhood representative will contact the City of Ames Neighborhood Liaison to organize a meeting where neighbors can discuss what maintenance items should be addressed and how they can work together to complete them. Next, City staff will help the neighborhood conduct a survey of all neighborhood residents. Residents can list their skills and also indicate that their own properties have the type of maintenance needs identified at the neighborhood meeting. Then, city staff will help the neighborhood to organize a work day, a work weekend, or any other time frame that best fits the type of work that the neighborhood has decided to work on. Newton, Marshalltown and other communities have successful programs that involve various groups in neighborhood clean-up and repair events.

Neighborhood Repair & Care is not limited to maintenance required by city code; it will reflect what is important to neighborhood residents. However, the program would be especially helpful for properties in a condition that may violate city codes, without the need for a city code citation. Neighborhood Repair and Care will help people not because they had to ask for help, but because the neighborhood wants to work together to improve any property that needs it.

Next steps: The next step is to find a neighborhood willing to kick off this program, perhaps with a project in spring 2010. The Neighborhood Liaison will also assist the first few interested neighborhoods to request needed financial assistance, similar to the support available through the Neighborhood Improvement Grants. Mailing and other public information will follow further explaining this opportunity and how to participate.

Clubs Repair and Care

The third program element of Ames Repair and Care, called “Clubs Repair and Care,” offers various fraternal, social and youth groups throughout the community the opportunity to connection with people who need help with maintaining their residences or even with interested neighborhoods. These clubs can register with the Volunteer Center of Story County, which will help coordinate establishing these connections and assisting with ongoing residential maintenance needs. Some of these ongoing needs include tree trimming, removing brush,

controlling weeds, removing snow and the other tasks described above as the initial focus of this program.

Clubs Repair and Care offers property owners who cannot maintain their properties another option for assistance should they be uncomfortable with accepting help from a neighbor. The property owner can request Club help from the Volunteer Center of Story County or can be referred by a City Inspector investigating a possible code violation.

Next steps: The Club Repair and Care program element can start in the next few months (depending on weather). Staff has been in contact with the Iowa State University Collegiate Panhellenic Council (CPC) and the Interfraternity Council (IFC) who have both expressed their interest in participation of the program. Some Greek chapters would value an ongoing relationship with an individual or a neighborhood. A representative of the Ames Kiwanis also supports the proposed Ames Repair Care programs.

Support Needs

Initially, the only monetary cost to the City for these programs is staff time. The Neighborhood Liaison and Neighborhood Intern can continue to coordinate the program. The Volunteer Center of Story County will use its list of potential volunteers for any of the program elements. There will be some printing cost to prepare promotional materials. TV12 and the Cityside newsletter can also help build public awareness of these programs. An awards program is another way to increase recognition and awareness of the program, its benefit and the need for volunteers.

It is likely that very soon tools, equipment and some materials will be needed. Some volunteers may already have some of these supplies, but many other willing individuals may see this as a barrier to participation. For example, the Volunteer Center of Story County frequently needs trucks for hauling. Brush, trash and junk removed from residential properties will need to be hauled and deposited in approved facilities, which charge fees. Staff will continue to work together and with businesses and organizations in Ames to find ways to meet these needs for tools, materials and services.

Although as proposed, Ames Repair and Care is focused on few activities, over time the program could evolve into a series on monthly events around town, each with a different focus. Neighborhoods, student groups and service clubs interested in “green” improvements, such as tree planting, rain barrels, rain gardens, removing environmental hazards, could be active in one month. Another month the focus could be on getting rid of used-up furniture and other “junk,” perhaps through a furniture collection and exchange event, such as Iowa City’s Rummage in the Ramp or Des Moines’ SCRUB program organizing neighborhood events with a drop-off site for trash and yard waste. Ultimately, more active and visible events can help all program elements grow and further strengthen neighborhoods.