

OPERATION

Clean Sweep



WARREN CLEANS UP TARGETED NEIGHBORHOODS



Warren,
pop. 134,056



City of Warren property maintenance inspector Frank Badalamente writes a five-day warning notice.

In November 2007, my top priority became making Warren a cleaner and safer city. The “cleaner city” priority began with my campaign idea to conduct organized neighborhood sweeps in targeted neighborhoods. I established a task force with the directive of replacing the system of reacting to blight complaints citywide to initiating a pro-active program that would produce visible results in target neighborhoods. Previously, blight inspectors would inspect blight complaints haphazardly throughout the 34.5 square mile city. This unsystematic approach made follow up very difficult and inefficient.

The task force recommended a teamwork idea involving the following city departments: assessing, communications, building inspections, Department of Public Works, planning, police, property main-tenance, and sanitation. Neighborhood Clean Sweep began in April 2008, and is conducted annually. Over 70,000 commercial and residential buildings have been inspected since the program began. Here’s how each department contributed to the effort:

Planning

The planning department identified city neighborhoods that needed cleanups. Almost all were in the city’s south end, which featured houses built during WWII. The typical wood-framed home had 900 square feet on a 40 ft. lot. Thirty years ago, these neighborhoods were dominated by owner-occupied homes. As seniors moved, they were replaced by renters.

Assessing

The assessing department provided addresses of all businesses and residences in each targeted neighborhood. The list eliminated addresses of all vacant buildings and empty lots. It was what I called a “purged” list that saved city taxpayers printing and postage costs.

Communications

Communications staff developed a brochure for mailing that warned those on the mailing list in advance of inspectors arriving in their neighborhoods. We timed the mailings of the brochure to arrive at least one week prior to sweeps week so residents would have time to clean up their yards. TV Warren, the city’s cable TV station, promoted the sweeps schedules.

Building Department

Building department inspectors went through neighborhoods “tagging” vacant homes and checking commercial properties for zoning and blight violations.

Department of Public Works (DPW)

DPW crews drove street sweeping vehicles in the target neighborhoods during sweeps week.

Police

Police officers ticketed junk and unlicensed vehicles parked on city streets.

Property Maintenance

Inspectors walked house-to-house during sweeps week issuing 5-day cleanup warning notices and following up with district court violations for non-compliance.

Sanitation

Sanitation workers picked up everything placed at the curb during sweeps week, allowing residents to clean up large items. The amount of rubbish collected during that week increased dramatically.

The results of Operation: Clean Sweep have been visible. Residents and businesses are cleaning up their properties before sweeps week to avoid a 5-day warning notice and possible \$1,000 district court fines.

Of the 30,000 warning notices issued, only 350 were ticketed. This means the vast majority of businesses and residences cited for blight cleaned their properties within the 5-day period. An interesting side note is the response of residents and business owners. They made comments to our inspectors like: “It’s about time city hall did something about eliminating blight,” “My neighborhood looks cleaner,” and “My neighbors are now taking pride in their homes.” To be honest, negative comments like: “Why are inspectors nitpicking every little thing?” have been rare.

Most violations could easily be corrected during the 5-day period, but some, like repainting a garage, needed more time and inspectors were instructed to be flexible.

Vacant Homes, Lots, and Rentals

Also, we demolished over 600 vacant, dilapidated houses that were evaluated as “unfit for human habitation” by our building inspectors. Previously, the city had demolished less than 100 dilapidated homes over a 5-year period. (Since 2006, the percentage of vacant addresses in Warren has more than doubled from 2.6 percent to 6.7 percent.)

Inspectors are instructed to cite vacant lots for high grass or weeds. If the owner of record does not comply with the



Operation: Clean Sweep is an annual blight eradication campaign. Over 70,000 commercial and residential buildings have been inspected since the program began. At left is a vacant home before Operation: Clean Sweep, and at right is after neighborhood sweeps.

5-day warning notice, a city contractor cuts the grass and bills the owner, usually a bank or mortgage company through the property maintenance division.

Suspected drug dens are referred to the special investigations unit of the police department by inspectors. Drug raids have been conducted, pleasing nearby residents. This unit averages 20 arrests and three search warrants each month.

Inspectors are also instructed to list homes advertised for rent, and the rental inspections division follows up with a phone call warning that rental units must be registered with the city. As a result, over 6,000 rental units are now registered with the city and being inspected by our city's rental inspectors every two years.

“My neighbors are now taking pride in their homes.”

Anti-Blight Hotline


We also established an anti-blight telephone hotline seven days a week, 24 hours each day to record anonymous complaints about blight. The complaints are forwarded to property maintenance inspectors.

The hotline also records non blight-related complaints that are forwarded to the respective departments via a new system called QAlert; no phone calls need to be made. The complaints are forwarded by QAlert and checked for follow up on the system.

QAlert Mobile provides the only known CRM (Customer Relationship Management) integrated tablet application that allows the inspector to respond in real-time to log activities and photos, complete the task, and automatically notify the resident. This new and revolutionary mobile responder also creates a paperless and accountable mobile workforce, using geospatial (GIS) technology, and outputs reliable performance measurement data.

Since the blight sweeps are conducted April through October, the property maintenance inspectors are seasonal employees paid on an hourly basis.

Operation: Clean Sweep is an unqualified success. Neighborhoods are indeed cleaner, and residents are taking pride in their neighborhoods and calling in blighted structures for city action.

The important features of this program are communicating with residents that sweeps week is soon coming in their neighborhoods, and the teamwork approach among several city departments. 

James R. Fouts is the mayor of Warren, Michigan. You may contact him at 586-574-4520 or mayor@cityofwarren.org.



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