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[Positive Changes Fix Problems In Building Dept.](#)

Tue, Feb 23, 2010

[City Government](#), [News](#)

Although [past problems in the city's building department may be partly to blame for 39 homes in West University Place failing to earn documents indicating they are safe and up to code](#), the department in 2005 began making changes that may have already corrected most problems.

The building department has seen key staffing changes, and instituted a new fail-safe procedure to ensure all houses earn certificates of occupancy, said Public Works Director Chris Peifer. Also, the building department hopes that a new citywide computer system currently under development will make it all but impossible to identify building permits that are set to expire, ensuring that future houses do not fall through the cracks.

Professionalizing The Department

Peifer said the building department began professionalizing its operations in 2005 when

Debbie Scarcella, who currently serves as the West U. city planner, joined the team. At that time, she was doing the job of the top building official and the city planner.

About ~~18 percent~~ 20 percent of the homes on the list failed to earn certificates after 2005 — If not counting five from 2008 that appear to be on the market, with no current tenants, according to Harris County Appraisal District Records. Out of 34 total homes remaining to count, there are three homes on the list from 2005, one from 2006 and three from 2007.

The city planner and building official positions were separated in 2007 when the city hired a professional, certified building official who left after just one year for another position closer to his home. Now John Brown, a certified building official as well as flood plain administrator, has filled that position.

“Not to speak any ill of the past, but we’ve been very fortunate to attract more skilled professionals,” Peifer said. “They’ve been able to take it up a notch.”

Brown is the staffer whose research revealed the 39 homes without certificates of occupancy. He has already taken one company, Covington Builders, in front of the city’s Building and Standards Commission to try to bring about his compliance on 10 homes without certificates. Brown is working behind the scenes with other builders to fix issues with their homes.

Because there were only 20 building permits issued during the 2009 recession, the department was able to take time to professionalize its staff and operations even more, Peifer said. The two building inspectors on staff have taken continuing education classes to earn additional inspection licenses. And Brown had the time to conduct his research and discover that 39 homes had never received certificates of occupancy.

“It was like so many things in life,” Peifer said. “This issue came up, and we embraced the opportunity. We knew there would be some fallout as this came out.”

Builders Notice Improvements

Stonehenge Custom Homes owner David Crow, who is working with Brown to clear issues with two of his homes from 2000, said he’s noticed major improvements since Brown became the building official over a year ago and started making changes. Before, Crow said he could never get appointments to ask important questions about his projects.

“John has made himself very open to builders coming in and asking questions,” Crow said. “I feel like John does listen. I feel it’s better now.”

Karl Caillouet, co-owner of Palomino Enterprises LLC, said he’s only had good experiences with the West U. building department. Caillouet’s company has built homes in West U. for about seven years — None of his homes are on the list.

“The builder who is interested in doing it right, the inspector is his best friend,” Caillouet

said. "They're a big help to the builder and the homeowner. It's a benefit to everyone concerned."

He said he thinks the city should try to better enforce its own rules, but the most blame should rest with builders for not completing inspections, because they are the only ones who know when a home is ready for an inspection.

"He knew it from the day he got the permit and he was handed that yellow card, he knew it had to be completed to get that certificate of occupancy," Caillouet said. "They dadgum well knew it."

New Safety-Net Procedure

Peifer said he thinks one reason that fewer homes fell through the cracks in the last couple years is because of a new procedure the building department is using.

"We figured, how can we tell? How can we prohibit someone moving into a house that wasn't finalized?" Peifer said. "What do all people need before they move into a home? It's water service."

The city now refuses to turn on new residents' water service unless they show a certificate of occupancy. The city followed the same policy in the 1990s, but it was discontinued in the past decade, Peifer said. Since the city has used the procedure again, fewer homes have failed to earn certificates of occupancy.

Five homes from 2008 do not have certificates — But these are the addresses that HCAD shows are still in the possession of real estate firms, and do not yet have tenants. In 2009, only 20 building permits were issued, and those permits will not expire until 12 months after the issuance date.

New Computer System Coming

Another reason Peifer said the city didn't catch the homes without certificates until now is because of an outdated computer system that is difficult to use. It doesn't automatically highlight expired building permits.

Fortunately, the entire city is in the process of transferring to a newer computer system called Innoprise, Peifer said. The software has an easier, more intuitive user interface.

Brown said he hopes the new software will automatically allow building staff to know when permits are about to expire. The system will be able to automatically send emails and letters to remind contractors about upcoming deadlines. After a permit expires, the system will clearly highlight those cases for staff.

Until the new system is implemented in the summer, building department staffers are doing the best they can with the current software. They keep up with expiring permits and make sure to call contractors when deadlines are approaching, Peifer said.

Future Review Possible

Although the department did make positive changes in the last half of the decade, this fiasco with the 39 homes may put the department under a microscope of sorts.

Karen Johnson, a member of the Building and Standards Commission, said she hopes West U.'s procedures for enforcing its building laws will become the subject of future meetings.

"We need to clean up the process," Johnson said during a phone interview. "I personally want to see a plan put forth to make sure this doesn't happen again."

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