

Fight blight on all fronts

Mayor Mitch Landrieu's administration is focused on seizing and selling derelict properties, and getting ramshackle houses out of the hands of negligent owners is a smart approach to fighting blight.

The city has an estimated 43,800 blighted properties, according to a recent study. Those eyesores are a hazard to public health, safety and quality of life, as well as economic development. Getting them up to code quickly should be a high priority for the city.

To that end, Mayor Landrieu has announced the ambitious goal of eliminating 10,000 nuisance properties by 2014. The administration said it wants to hold 1,000 sheriff's sales this year to meet that objective.

Going forward, though, the city needs to use every tool to combat blight, including aggressive enforcement of fines, something that didn't happen under Mayor Ray Nagin.

The Nagin administration only used sheriff's sales seven times in eight years, and fines levied against property owners were allowed to go uncollected. Nearly 3,300 properties have outstanding fines for code violations, amounting to a whopping \$29 million.

The cost of weak enforcement isn't limited to uncollected revenue. Two recent fires involved properties whose owners had outstanding fines.

Fines that aren't enforced are meaningless, and it's frustrating that so many property owners were allowed to ignore the city's demands.

So far, the Landrieu administration hasn't done much to reduce the backlog of uncollected fines. As of Jan. 14, only 355 owners had paid any amount at all. Jeff Hebert, who handles blight for the administration, said that the large amount that remains outstanding is a reflection of the Nagin administration's failure to enforce the ultimate penalty: seizure and sale.

Fines are a tool to encourage owners to bring their property up to code, he said. If that doesn't work — and quickly — the city has the authority to seize and sell them. State and local laws allow the city to initiate that process just 30 days after an owner fails to pay a fine. Theoretically, the process can proceed fairly quickly, since a sale can be scheduled within 60 days of a lien being issued.

But in practice, seizure and sale can take longer. The Landrieu administration has only set sheriff's sales for 63 properties so far, a delay that Mr. Hebert blamed on the previous administration's failure to notify all interested parties of maximum fines and the potential for seizure and sale.

The city stands to gain more revenue from sheriff's sales than collecting outstanding fines, Mr. Hebert said, and getting new owners who will bring properties into compliance is another incentive for focusing on sheriff's sales.

But fines can be a part of the solution, too, and the Landrieu administration should make sure that property owners no longer see them as an empty threat.