Code Enforcement

Why this Issue?

➤ *Municipal interviews*
➤ *Community leader interviews*
➤ *Resident surveys*
➤ *Focus groups*
➤ *Business surveys*

Consistently throughout the process of gathering information, we heard from residents, community leaders and business owners about code enforcement and the permitting process. Most of the comments were about increasing or strengthening code enforcement, having consistent enforcement, and frustration with the permit process. Interviews and resident survey comments make it clear there is a level of disconnect between the municipal government and what community members understand.

Resident and business responsibilities. Many in the community seemingly are unaware of some of their responsibilities as homeowners or commercial property owners. Resident survey results and interviews also provided insight into the difficulties some have with the upkeep of their homes. The most common issues survey respondents had difficulty with over the past year were affording house repairs (119 respondents) and mowing grass or shoveling snow (104 respondents). There were also 41 respondents who self-identified as having a mental illness. 57 respondents stated they could not find help for the identified area of difficulty.

Some have explained they were unaware a permitting process even exists for homeowners. Others aren't clear on what they need a permit for, and have heard stories of people getting permits retroactively after completing a project. Others mentioned the fees associated with permitting are too high. People don't know where to find trustworthy contractors. There doesn't seem to be a clear understanding that the permitting process is related to safety.

Borough responsibilities and limitations. Residents and community leaders both mentioned a desire for stronger enforcement by the Borough on residential, rental property, and business properties. Community members don't seem to fully understand what the Borough is responsible for enforcing and where the Borough's hands are tied legally for enforcement, resulting in a feeling that the municipal government does not care about or prioritize these concerns.

"The direct cost of blighted properties on communities can be staggering. Vacant properties impose direct costs on code enforcement units, police and fire departments, and other governmental agencies. In addition, they impose indirect costs on property values and associated tax revenues." -Kermit Lind

---

Recommendations

1. **Updates to the website.** Recommended ideas to explore:
    - Put Dormont Delivers link on code enforcement page
    - Information in plain English about responsibilities – perhaps using graphics

2. **Incorporate code enforcement information into a comprehensive communications plan.** Educate community members about the most common code violations and responsibilities of residents and other property owners. Recommended ideas to explore include:
    - Mailing a postcard or refrigerator magnet to all residents/property owners/businesses
    - Community education meetings
    - Provide information and resources to share in other groups' newsletters
    - Provide a list of resources for things people may be cited for but unable to get help with (removing snow, mowing lawn, home repairs, etc.) in official Borough communications
    - Include information in a welcome packet for new homeowners, new businesses, and new property owners about property owner responsibilities, resources, and code enforcement in general (why it's important, what can you be cited for, etc.)

3. **Provide resources to encourage and assist with compliance.** Recommended ideas to explore include hardship payment plans and a list of local volunteers to help with mowing lawns or shoveling snow.

Resources and potential partners

- Cranberry Township link for the Prescriptive Residential Wood Deck Construction Guide based on the 2009 IRC.

4. **Build education into existing proactive code enforcement strategies.** Recommended ideas to explore include:

- Provide in-person training session and video online/social media on how to use Dormont Delivers.
- Neighborhood sweeps. "A sweep identifies an area exhibiting distress and involves sending a blanket letter to each property owner in the identified area. The sweep letter is sent to the resident occupying the property regardless of ownership status. The letter lets the residents know that officers will be in the area soon. The letter identifies three to four common violations and explains the code in plain English. The letter requests the property owners/residents inspect their own premises and resolve any issues prior to when the code enforcement officer returns. The code enforcement officer follows up at the time they have noted in the letter and begins a formal notice procedure on any remaining issues."
- Review entire street when responding to a complaint so as to reduce complaints that "I received a citation, but my neighbor across the street has grass even higher than me and they didn't get one."
- Create a voluntary database of residents and business owners who need communication accommodations should they have a violation or need to request a permit (translated materials, braille, etc.).

5. Explore legal changes to help with enforcement strategies, including revisions to current code, ordinances, zoning.

- Seattle Carl Haglund Law: No rent increases on properties that violate the city's core standards for livability
- Require pre-sale inspections for homes with known code violations.
- Must fix or notify new owners of deficiencies. Require purchasers of homes that have known code violations to resolve violations within set time frame.
- Simplify the code, ordinance, and permitting language and provide layperson's reference guides. Pull together a group of community members to test and make recommended changes to the language before finalizing to ensure user understanding.
- Revisions to zoning and ordinances to ensure compliance from commercial properties.
- Ability to issue on-the-spot citations.

Resources and potential partners

- Borough solicitor
- Planning or consulting firms
- Data-Driven Systems: Model Practices & Policies for Strategic Code Enforcement
- Using Market Driven Decision-Making for Strategic Code Enforcement Success
- Vacant Property Research Network code enforcement policy brief (in progress)
- University or college law schools

- ICMA
- Fair Housing Act modifications

6. **Explore changes to staffing structure.** Recommended ideas to explore:
   - Consolidating code and fire staff
   - Hiring crossing guards during summer for part-time code enforcement