Let’s plan before we demolish

New Jersey is in desperate need of a cohesive housing policy

Stephen H. O’Connor Guest Columnist

Gov. Chris Christie’s recent announcement to initiate a massive demolition of abandoned properties in Newark and Trenton should be applauded, as it offers an opportunity to physically and economically reshape these urban centers. While demolition of properties is an extreme measure, properly planning the process can provide a blueprint for similar situations in other communities. The scope of the challenge is formidable. According to the 2006 American Community Survey, there are 34,394 housing units within the city of Trenton, 4,038 of which are recorded as vacant. That’s almost 20 percent of the total. Newark has 93,054 vacant housing units, which equals nearly 16 percent of the city’s existing housing stock. Furthermore, across the state, there are more than 100,000 vacant housing units, with 38,000 vacant units of housing. When you do the math, that means there are over 100,000 abandoned housing units in New Jersey. While vacant doesn’t necessarily translate into abandoned, we won’t split hairs.

So before the bulldozers arrive, let’s develop a strategy by mapping the locations of the units to be eliminated. Once identified, an assessment of what will remain is essential. The prospect of a few occupied housing units surrounded by a sea of empty lots is as damaging to the visual and physical health of abandoned properties.

Formal policies provide a good example, although in 2015 there were more than three times as many vacant units as there are now. In fact, the plan as outlined by Trenton, given the scale of the challenge, didn’t begin to come together until years after work was underway. Trenton's own data shows that in 2015, 15 percent of the city's vacant properties had not been logged. The city's plan involved the creation of an inventory of properties. As projects were completed, the data was updated, which allowed for a better understanding of the number of properties in need of rehabilitation.

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Burlington, Camden and Gloucester counties. They combined for 6,033 residential foreclosures. And no, with less than 700 vacant units in foreclosure, Camden doesn’t skew this number. In fact, it doesn’t even make the top 10.

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For The Star-Ledger

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