

Brighton-Pittsford Post – “From the Supervisor” column – May 26, 2016 issue
Submitted by Pittsford Town Supervisor Bill Smith

Setting the Right Example for ‘Zombie’ properties

In 2014, Pittsford became the first Town in Monroe County to adopt legislation to move aggressively against derelict properties that blight neighborhoods. You’ll often see these referred to as “zombie” properties.

The sight of vacant properties in disrepair is disconcerting. For nearby homeowners a derelict property represents a serious problem, degrading the quality of neighborhood life and depressing house values. Typically these properties are in foreclosure, with the owners long gone. We all recognize the problem when we see it: boarded windows, legal notices pasted to doorfronts, a tarp over a failing roof and other obvious symptoms of decay.

This problem had concerned me for some time. Early in February 2014, soon after entering office as Supervisor, I reviewed with the Town Attorney the scope of the Town’s authority to act to address these troubled properties. At that time we could do little to remedy conditions constituting an eyesore, unless safety or public health issues also were presented. So we amended Pittsford’s municipal code. Local Law No. 7 of 2014 added to the Code a new Chapter 66, “Buildings and Property Maintenance.” It gives the Town the maximum scope of authority permitted by law to take action in addressing derelict properties.

The owner of a vacant property, or the party responsible for it, such as a bank that has foreclosed, must register the property with the Town. The registrant must state its plan for the property and must specify who will be responsible for maintaining it – typically, a property maintenance company. The property maintenance company also must register with the Town. This provides us with all relevant contact information to be able to reach the responsible party directly and immediately.

If the bank or its property-maintenance company falls behind in maintenance, the Town can order specific work to be done. If ignored, the Town can perform the work or have it performed. The cost is added to the tax bill on the house – which is paid first when the house ultimately is sold in foreclosure. Moreover, we found that out-of-state headquarters of previously elusive banks will return messages promptly, when the message refers to a demolition order.

Results have been visible around the Town for nearly two years now. Properties once visibly decayed now look like they belong in the neighborhood. The status report that pleases me the most consists of calls and messages from neighbors expressing satisfaction with the results achieved.

In the years since we first took action, other towns have followed Pittsford’s lead. And we, in turn, are learning by observing how other local municipalities approach the problem. We’ll have no hesitation incorporating into our Code good ideas from other towns that can help us in Pittsford.

They’ll find, as we have, that the work continues. As properties move off the list of derelicts, others join it. As your Town Supervisor, I’m committed to addressing them with the same determination that’s motivated us from the outset.