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Tackling blight, hoping it pays off

By Lini S. Kadaba

Inquirer Staff Writer

The power of prayer, persistence and perspiration was on display yesterday as volunteers made a stand under the hot sun to take back a piece of impoverished Cramer Hill in Camden.

> The community cleanup and rally focused squarely on a neglected parcel with a tax lien of more than \$25,000 on River Road next to St. Anthony of Padua church and school. The boarded-up house on a weed-choked lot is a point of contention between church and city officials.

> Known as "Ron's House" after its last tenant, Ron Hurlburt, who died at 57 in 2006, it not only has been an eyesore, but also has attracted vandals and drug users, said the Rev. Jud Weiksna, pastor at St. Anthony's.

> "ENOUGH IS ENOUGH," blared a banner attached to the two-story house, its windows broken and roof worn out.

> "Unjust laws . . . allow a house like this to stand so close to our school," the pastor said to two dozen adults and teens after he led the group in prayer at the start of the cleanup.

> Church and community leaders contend that 18 months of appeals have met bureaucracy and stalled improvement efforts. St. Anthony's wants to take control of the site, raze the building, and build a much-needed gym for its school, which serves kindergartners to eighth graders.

> "All we get is red tape," Weiksna said as he pulled on gloves to tackle weeds.

> "It gets frustrating," agreed the Rev. G. Kent Walmsley, pastor at Hope Memorial Baptist Church in Cramer Hill and a member of Camden Churches Organized for People, which sponsored the cleanup.

> While the Mayor's Office was not officially represented at the rally, resident Yolanda Aguilar de Neely, an assistant to Mayor Gwendolyn Faison, said she often fielded calls through the Office of Constituent Services about rundown properties and knew the system could seem unresponsive.

> But "it isn't always us vs. them," she told the gathering. "There are some of us in the city who have been trying.

> "It has nothing to do with incompetent leaders," de Neely added. Rather, she said, the city has been neglected for far too long, and other abandoned homes are in more need of attention. "We will continue within to see what we can do to turn over this house to you."

> Hurlburt, described as a wonderful man by several people, lived in the house with his parents until they died a few years ago. He was unable to maintain the property and fell behind in bills. Weiksna said Hurlburt, who was mentally challenged, had said he wanted the church to have the house but never wrote his wishes down.

> The holdup appears to be the tax lien, which the city wants to recoup but the church cannot afford.

> "We are a poor parish," Weiksna said.

> Instead, St. Anthony's wants a trade.

> It has found a contractor willing to tear down the building and clear the land for no charge, an operation that can cost more than \$15,000, Weiksna said.

> St. Anthony's, along with the churches group, also has already put in 1,250 hours of manpower on three previous cleanups, the pastor said. And he has collected numerous drug baggies and vials from the sidewalk out front.

> In return for those efforts, the church wants the city to give it the property.

> Meanwhile, only an hour into the cleanup, volunteers had gathered seven large trash bags of debris.

> "I want this to be gone," Hilda Rodriguez, 52, of Camden, said of the house. Sweat ran down her face as she tugged at weeds.

> Yesterday was her birthday, Rodriguez said. "This is my gift," she said, smiling. "God gives us his light, so we are here."

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