

Scenic Watch



News in
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Fewer "Zombie" eyesores and more affordable housing units made available during a major transformation of St. Petersburg's codes process



St. Petersburg improves its housing stock by transforming vacant lots into affordable housing.

Photo: Mark Wemple

"By dealing aggressively with the owners of dilapidated homes and vacant lots, St. Petersburg has improved its housing stock — and is transforming some vacant lots into affordable housing in the process.

James Corbett, St. Petersburg's code enforcement director, grew up in the city, the son of a single mother. They lived in a couple of rental homes before his mother, a bookkeeper for Pinellas County Schools, was able to buy a house in south St. Petersburg. The purchase, he says, gave the family 'a sense of place, a sense of stability.'



Today, St. Petersburg has about 110 vacant and boarded properties - roughly one-eighth the number it had in 2014, and well below pre-recession levels. Photo: Mark Wemple

...The city's incoming mayor at the time, Rick Kriseman, ordered employees to speed up demolitions and crack down on deadbeat property owners. During the next year, the city demolished more than 100 abandoned, privately owned structures and repaired another 62. Within four years, that list had shrunk to about 200 properties....



St. Petersburg initiated foreclosure proceedings against 635 properties. Only 70 remain in foreclosure today.

Photo: Mark Wemple

Many cities deal with the zombie-lot problem with an approach that some call 'file and forget' — they slap code-enforcement liens on neglected lots and hope that real estate values eventually rise enough to make the owners want to get out of arrears and either sell, develop or refinance the property.

Instead, Corbett went after the owners of the zombie lots more aggressively, using a tactic that cities typically shy away from — foreclosure. In 2016, he identified the owners of dozens of empty lots, mostly in historically black neighborhoods south of downtown. Often, the property owners owed more in taxes or fines than the properties were worth. 'You might have \$40,000 in liens on a lot that was worth \$20,000,' he says...

Today, St. Petersburg has about 110 vacant and boarded properties — roughly one-eighth the number it had in 2014, and well below pre-recession levels. Meanwhile, the city has begun turning some of the foreclosed properties into affordable housing...

The city responded by trying to turn some foreclosures into first homes for local residents instead of selling the lots to developers. Under the program, the city acquires an abandoned lot at auction, clears the title and gives it to a non-profit

developer. The developer, in turn, builds a home and sells it to a lower-income family. So far, the city has acquired 50 lots this way, and nine houses have been built and sold to first time home buyers...

An Effective Tool

St. Petersburg is believed to be the first city in Florida to regularly use foreclosure to try to reduce blight, though others have since followed.

In 2019, Largo, just north of St. Petersburg, moved to foreclose on a handful of derelict properties with longstanding liens. 'We never want to do that, but sometimes this is a tool that we have to use to get people's property into compliance,' the city's community standards manager, Tracey Schofield, has said.

In 2020, Bradenton also implemented a lien foreclosure program, telling the local newspaper, 'We hope we can take care of the worst of the worst and remove the people who own them now...'

Lien Forgiveness

Last year, Pinellas County adopted a plan to partially forgive liens on residential and commercial properties in unincorporated areas, saying code enforcement fines shouldn't be so excessive that they hinder reinvestment and development.

At the time, the county had more than 500 properties with liens exceeding their market value — a total of about \$300 million in liens. The county figured it could reduce that number to \$30 million by capping liens at \$20,000 per violation for a single-family home and \$100,000 for another building type. Before then, the county had no limit on liens, which increase daily...

James Corbett, code enforcement director for St. Petersburg, says lien forgiveness is a good idea in many cases. He says the city often works with distressed homeowners to reduce their liens and settle their debt, but forgiveness is less effective in cases where the property has been abandoned and the owner wants nothing to do with it, he adds. In those cases, he says, the best thing for everyone — the city, the neighborhood and even the owner — could be to foreclose, clear the title, and sell the property to someone who wants it."

-- Amy Martinez, Florida Trends

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[Scenic St. Petersburg works with the city codes department to make a better city - Visit their site here](#)

"The 9 Principles of Florida-Friendly Landscaping™"



Photo: UF

1. Right Plant, Right Place Achieving a healthy, low-maintenance home landscape starts with putting the right plant in the right place. Select plants that match a site's soil, light, water, and climatic conditions.

2. Water Efficiently An efficient irrigation system conserves water and helps to ensure that fertilizer and other pollution doesn't flow into water bodies.

3. Fertilize Appropriately Proper fertilization enhances growth, increases flowering or fruiting, corrects nutritional deficiencies, and enhances the plant's appearance. Improper fertilization can damage plants and the environment.

4. Mulch Mulch helps retain soil moisture, protects plants, and inhibits weed growth. It gives your landscape a neat, uniform appearance and is a great Florida-Friendly choice for hard-to-mow areas and shady spots.

5. Attract Wildlife Select plants with seeds, fruit, foliage, flowers, or berries that provide food. Supply sources of water, such as a rain garden or bird bath.

6. Manage Yard Pests Responsibly To prevent disease and insect outbreaks, select

pest-resistant plants and put them in suitable locations. When problems do arise, remove the affected leaves or plant parts, or pick the insects off by hand.

7. Recycle Yard Waste Decomposing organic matter releases nutrients back to the soil in a form that plants can easily use. Using yard waste for composting is a sustainable way of creating organic fertilizer.

8. Reduce Stormwater Runoff Fertilizers, pesticides, debris, and eroded soil carried in stormwater can wreak havoc on our water quality. Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ seeks to retain and use as much of the rainfall and irrigation water that lands on our home landscapes as possible.

9. Protect the Waterfront Florida boasts over 10,000 miles of rivers and streams, about 7,800 lakes, more than 700 freshwater springs, and the U.S.'s second-longest coastline."

-- IFAS Extension University of Florida

[Get MORE Details on each of the principals at the Extension Service's site](#)

"Pensacola developing tree database to learn status of every city-owned tree"



Photo: Tony Giberson

"Pensacola will soon know the location, size and health status of every tree on city property.

Over the next seven weeks, crews from the consulting firm Geosyntec will be in city parks and along city streets cataloging every tree into a new database.

City Arborist Kris Stultz told the News Journal the database will give the city insight into the city's tree canopy that it has never had before.

'It's a very nice load of information to have because now we can truly manage the forest that we have here,' Stultz said. 'Right now, as a general idea, we don't know what we have. We don't know what condition it's in. This will give us a very good volume of data that we can start being proactive...'

The total cost of the survey is \$119,000 and will record every tree in city parks and city-owned rights of way.

Once the survey is complete, anytime a city worker performs work on a tree or plants a new tree, it will be documented in the city's database...

Stultz said the database can be used to target where new trees are needed to plant in city parks and along city streets, as well as fully document the labor the city puts into maintaining its tree canopy.

For example, Stultz said there are lots of Laurel oaks that have a much shorter lifespan than other oak trees. 'They don't live longer than about 70 years,' Stultz said. 'Once they get to a certain size, we've got start looking and say hey, it's getting about time we need to start thinking about removing this tree and replacing it with other trees to keep the forest at a continual density.'

Some tree species are more susceptible to storm damage than others, and with the data in hand, city officials can prioritize where storm assessments can begin based on the type of trees in an area, Stultz said...

'An inventory is useless usually three years after it's taken, unless it's been updated,' Stultz said.

Stultz said he hopes the software included in the database will allow the inventory to be updated by almost any city employee conducting work or even members of the public.

The software that updates the database can run on a tablet and has been designed to be updated by someone who may not have a lot of experience with trees.

Stultz said he could see a community group or a gardening club opting to get access to the software from the city and spend a weekend updating the tree inventory in their neighborhood park.

'That's the other beauty of this system is the simplicity to it,' Stultz said. 'Once you have the initial inventory, updating it is fairly simple.'

-- Jim Little, Pensacola News Journal

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LEGAL: "Federal appeals court backs Florida man in religious sign dispute"



FORT MYERS — FLORIDA —

"A federal appeals court Tuesday sided with a man who challenged a Fort Myers Beach ordinance that prevented him from carrying a sign with a Christian message on the town's streets.

A three-judge panel of the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said a district judge should have granted a request by Adam LaCroix for a preliminary injunction against the ordinance, which barred portable signs.

The panel did not agree with an argument by LaCroix that the ordinance was a 'content-based' constitutional violation. But the judges said the town's prohibition on portable signs likely violated the First Amendment.

'The rich tradition of political lawn signs perhaps is surpassed only by America's history of marches and rallies dotted with handheld signs and placards of every imaginable description and covering every conceivable political message,' Judge Stanley Marcus wrote in a 26-page opinion joined by Judges Jill Pryor and Britt Grant. 'Images of demonstrators holding portable signs immediately spring to mind: the March on Washington, the Women's March, the 2000 presidential election protests in Dade County and Tallahassee, the Black Lives Matter protests in nearly every city in the country, the Tea Party protests, the Women's Suffrage March and many more. All of them involved people carrying portable signs. And all were easy to create and customize. If the town's prohibition on carrying all portable signs were to stand, all kinds of expressive speech protected by the First Amendment would be barred.'

The opinion said Fort Myers Beach passed a sign ordinance to try to prevent visual blight and barred portable signs. It said LaCroix in October 2020 was 'peaceably attempting to share his religious message on a public sidewalk' when he received a warning from a code-compliance officer about violating the sign ordinance. In December 2020, he received a citation.

'Although the record (in the case) does not tell us precisely the dimensions of the sign LaCroix held nor its exact message, we know that LaCroix said he shared his 'religious, political and social message' which 'is one of hope and salvation that Christianity offers,' Marcus wrote.

A town official subsequently dismissed the citation, but LaCroix filed a federal lawsuit alleging violations of the First Amendment, the Equal Protection Clause of

the U.S. Constitution and a state law known as the Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

U.S. District Judge Sheri Polster Chappell last year rejected the request for a preliminary injunction, spurring LaCroix and his attorneys from the American Liberties Institute to take the case to the Atlanta-based appeals court.

The opinion Tuesday sent the case back to district court..."

-- CBS Miami Team

[Read entire article](#)

International Bike Lane Issue: "Here's Your New Bike Lane. Oh, Did You Want It to Go Somewhere?"



Photo: Matt Roth for WSF

"...City officials across the U.S. are installing hundreds of miles of bike lanes as they respond to a cycling boom that began during the pandemic and capitalize on federal grants, including from the roughly \$1 trillion infrastructure law.

But car culture and political realities—anything that makes driving or parking harder doesn't tend to win a lot of voters — mean these routes are sometimes counterintuitive, unsafe and just plain pointless.

Kate Drabinski, a Baltimore bike commuter, said she couldn't wait to try out the newly painted lane down North Avenue. When she did, she was underwhelmed. 'It just sort of ends,' she said. 'And then there you are, on your bike, surrounded by cars.' [the southbound on-ramp of Interstate 83]

While commuters stayed home at the start of the pandemic, bike lanes sprang up seemingly everywhere, and more people began using them. Now, as cities come back to life, the mixing of car, bike and foot traffic is proving a bit rocky...

In New York City, cyclists are furiously ringing their bells and dodging guys in suits who don't seem to be aware they've stepped into two-wheeled traffic. But the cyclists don't all signal their presence, or stop for red lights, so on some streets it has become pedestrian beware.

The U.S. has more than 18,000 miles of bike lanes, low-traffic roads good for biking and off-road paths, according to the Adventure Cycling Association, which is assembling what it calls the U.S. Bicycle Route System. New York City alone has added about 120 miles of bike lanes since 2020, according to transportation officials...

The U.S. isn't the only place building more bike lanes. Some are head-scratchers. The central England town of Kidsgrove recently got its very first bike lane. It is 20 feet long.

'I wasn't sure what they were doing with the road closed for construction, and then when I saw the end result I thought—Blimey! That's it?' said nearby resident Bill Priddin. 'It's ludicrous. I have to smile every time I drive by it.'

The tiny lane links two sections of an off-road cycle path, and county officials say it offers a more direct and safer cycling route through town.

Even as cities try to do more for cyclists, there's no denying urban areas are still dominated by drivers. 'It's like a commandment: 'Thou shalt not upset drivers,' ' said Jed Weeks, head of the Baltimore cyclist group Bikemore.

On the other side, pro-driver groups, including the National Motorists Association, are urging cities not to make pandemic-era pedestrian and cycling accommodations permanent—and to cool it with the bike lanes. They've taken to calling cycling advocates 'Big Bike.'

'That was a term I coined because it's just unbelievable how these bike lanes are being constantly pushed on us,' said Shelia Dunn, a spokeswoman for the motorists group.

Should cities build more bike lanes? Or fewer?...

'I get roasted all the time by Twitter folks who say, 'What about Big Car?'' she said. 'Yeah, true. But the whole reason we have streets is because cars are the engine of the economy.'

The various modes of locomotion leave city officials 'stuck between two camps: the biking enthusiasts and everyone else,' said James T. Smith Jr., a former county executive who was chief of staff to the Baltimore mayor during development of the North Avenue project and other lanes.

'You end up with compromises,' he said, 'and I don't see that as such a bad thing.'

But those tweaked routes, cyclists say, are a big reason cities end up with bike lanes to nowhere and other impediments to a smooth ride...

This summer, L.A. opened the Sixth Street Viaduct connecting the Boyle Heights neighborhood to the city's arts district and downtown—a half-billion-dollar project celebrated for its wide, pedestrian access and bike lanes.

Only one problem: 'Uhhh, how do we get onto this?' said Eli Kaufman, executive director of the Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition, who biked it on opening day July 10.

To access bike lanes on the new bridge, cyclists face 200 or so feet of street riding with car traffic where there is an on-ramp. Photo: Eli Kaufman

To access the eye-catching new bridge, with its spectacular views of the city and its appealingly safe bike lanes, cyclists must first weave through lanes of traffic with scant signage for bicyclists, let alone dedicated pathways.

'It's actually funny, if it wasn't so upsetting,' said Mr. Kaufman. 'The logic is, there is no logic.'

-- Julie Bykowicz, WSJ

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