

Opponents take aim at Prairie Township code

Petition effort seeks vote on property rules

Saturday, January 01, 2005

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

There is a movement afoot in Prairie Township to freeze enforcement of a new property maintenance code until residents can have their say at the ballot box.

Code opponent Steve Kennedy said he expects to collect 600 signatures to put the issue on the November ballot. He said that would be well above the number that must be filed by Jan. 20 with the Franklin County Board of Elections.

"I haven't had anyone to refuse to sign," said Kennedy, owner of Steve's Country Drive Thru on W. Broad Street.

Otherwise, the code that trustees passed Dec. 21 with a 2-1 vote would take effect in January in the township along Columbus' Far West Side.

Township board Chairman Joe Wharton, who voted in favor of the code along with Trustee Teresa Keller, said the provisions aren't much different from zoning regulations used since 1982.

The issue had been debated for seven months, and public meetings became heated.

Township inspectors would be allowed to evaluate the exteriors of residences and write notices to owners whose properties are considered unsafe or unkempt.

Those who ignore a series of notices could be fined, from \$50 for the first time to \$500 for the fourth and subsequent violations.

"If you work with us, we'll waive the fines, I'm sure," Wharton said.

Among the code requirements:

- Foundations must adequately support buildings.
- Outdoor walls must have an "appropriate" finish and be free of holes, cracks and loose or rotting boards or panels. The same is true for doors, roofs, chimneys, porches, decks and patios.
- Exterior panels must be protected with paint or some other appropriate covering, unless it is a material designed to remain without treatment.
- Window glass must be intact.
- Rain gutters, downspouts, spillways and splash blocks must be used if needed to prevent a building's drainage from harming neighboring properties.
- Fences must be anchored firmly and not be in disrepair.
- Noxious weeds are prohibited. Grass may not exceed 10 inches in height.
- Outdoor storage is prohibited except for property meant to be outdoors, such as grills and patio furniture, and as long as the quality doesn't create a nuisance.



The code also doesn't allow outdoor accumulation of trash, junk vehicles, vehicle parts or other debris.

The new code also contains an occupancy limit of one resident for every 50 square feet of bedroom floor space.

That requirement has been promoted heavily since Sept. 12, when a fire at Lincoln Park West apartments killed 10 people in what has been called Franklin County's deadliest arson.

Kennedy is concerned about the code applying equally to everyone, given that the township is a mix of housing developments and rural areas.

He also wonders what can be done about overzealous inspectors or neighbors who use the code to settle a grudge.

"I don't think the code can solve the problem of neighbors picking on neighbors," Wharton said.

He had expected the issue would end up on the ballot. Had the issue failed, he said, supporters would have circulated their own petition.

"It's the American way. That's what's good about living in this country."

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