

MOTION

PLANNING & LAND USE MANAGEMENT

Los Angeles is home to a large number of vacant and abandoned buildings. In addition to being a potential source of blight in their neighborhoods, these buildings can pose a significant hazard to public health and safety. Just this month, a fire that started in a vacant house spread to two nearby apartment buildings in Westlake, leaving residents from 20 units without a home.

The Department of Building and Safety has nearly 600 open Vacant Building Abatement (VBA) cases for abandoned buildings in the City of Los Angeles that require ongoing monitoring, securing, and, in some cases, demolition. The City’s ability to respond to these buildings has been constrained by both staffing and regulatory obstacles.

The Department of Building and Safety has the authority to secure vacant properties if an owner fails to do so, but staffing levels are not sufficient to regularly monitor buildings that may subsequently be breached. The City also has the authority to demolish vacant or abandoned properties if they are found to constitute a public nuisance, but the protocols currently in use rely on procedures and legal guidance that are more than twenty years old and that are not responsive to the current needs on the ground.

The process from first identifying these buildings as targets for demolition to final approval can take up to nine months. When the Department of Building and Safety first identifies a building, they must contact the owner and allow a period of ten days to respond. If the owner does not take action in this time, the Department begins inspections to gather evidence that the building complies with the definition of a public nuisance. The Department currently requires evidence of repeated entries, but due to staffing limitations, they are only able to inspect most buildings once a month or less. After sufficient evidence has been gathered, which can take several months, the Department must prepare a packet of evidence and submit it to the Board of Building and Safety Commissioners for approval. The Board meets monthly, so this final step can add months more to the process.

The City should take steps now to adapt our response to abandoned buildings to proactively address the significant public safety threats—especially from fires—posed by these properties.

I THEREFORE MOVE that the City Council instruct the Los Angeles Department of Building and Safety, with the assistance of the City Attorney’s Office, the Department of City Planning, and any other relevant departments, as needed, to report back within 30 days with recommendations to shorten the timeline for securing, and, where required, declaring an abandoned building a public nuisance for the purpose of its demolition. The report should include a description of staffing increases necessary to conduct building inspections more efficiently and resolve cases more expeditiously, in addition to an identification of phases of the public nuisance determination process that may be expedited or streamlined.

PRESENTED BY:

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