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## Neglected Jersey Shore homes growing dilemma in Sandy recovery

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BY KAREN SUDOL

STAFF WRITER

THE RECORD

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THE CROSSINGS PREMIUM OUTLETS\*

WOODBURY COMMON PREMIUM OUTLETS\*



AMY NEWMAN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Robert Parsells, code enforcement officer for Union Beach, by an abandoned property on Beachview Avenue.

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Nearly a year after Superstorm Sandy destroyed entire stretches of the New Jersey coastline, towns are grappling with a new phase of recovery: how to balance the complaints of residents living next to neglected properties against the plight of homeowners who lost everything and have not decided whether to rebuild.

Many owners have yet to repair their homes because they're either contesting or haven't received flood insurance reimbursements. Others are waiting to receive state or federal grants or didn't even have flood insurance. Some are simply too overwhelmed to do anything

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**PAUL MILLER**

any thing.

How local officials attempt to motivate homeowners to clean up their forlorn properties varies by town. Some, feeling sympathetic toward down-and-out homeowners, are using volunteer resources to maintain the properties and are not issuing summonses. Others have taken a more aggressive approach by telling homeowners the town could demolish their properties for safety reasons and recoup costs through tax liens.

“It’s very difficult because you do have to take everything into consideration,” said Donna Wisniewski, past president of the American Association of Code Enforcement, a 667-member organization. “People who had insurance and were able to, for whatever reason, have their property rebuilt and restored and are living in it, they don’t want to be living next door to one that hasn’t been rebuilt. We have to get the community back as close as we can to where it was without it being a burden on anyone. It’s a fine line.”

Sandy’s impact throughout the state was far-reaching. About 40,500 primary residences and more than 15,600 rental units sustained “severe” or “major” damage, according to the state Department of Community Affairs.

Union Beach, a small Bayshore community in Monmouth County in which 85 percent of the 2,500 homes were flooded by at least 2 feet of water, has handled neighbor complaints with an eye toward patience, said Robert Parsells, the borough’s code enforcement officer.

“I’m having a hard time kicking people when they’re down,” he said. “I will not summons a person who’s been through all of this devastation.”

Parsells receives between 30 and 40 complaints a week about damaged properties in the community of mostly year-round homes. He and the building inspector view the sites and determine what needs to be done. The fixes can range from routine lawn maintenance to demolition. Under normal circumstances, summonses of up to \$300 a day would be issued for failing to maintain the property, Parsells said.

Instead, the list of homes needing lawn care is handed over to a member of the Gateway Church of Christ, a Holmdel-based church that has helped the town recover by providing supplies and volunteers. Wally Van Orden, a church member, said he spends five days a week whacking weeds that have grown to the size of small trees, mowing overgrown lawns and clearing debris from properties. The list includes 100 properties, 30 of which he’s completed.



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Van Orden said he volunteered because he didn't want residents to receive summonses or have liens placed on their properties for non-compliance. He is now being paid through a grant obtained by the church.

"It's heartbreaking, especially for the people who were here and can't afford to come back," Van Orden said.

During the summer, the church organized 50 to 100 youth volunteers to clean up storm-damaged properties, said Carl Williamson, lead evangelist for the church.

The borough is also relying on volunteers to demolish about 102 homes that remain from a list of 300 slated to come down. Union Beach has received reimbursement from the Federal Emergency Management Agency for the 200 or so that have already been razed, but the borough has been approved for only eight of the remaining homes. Those 100 or so owners will need to pay to have the debris carted away, Borough Administrator Jennifer Maier said.

The neglected properties have an effect not only on neighboring property values but also on the spirits of those who have to view the homes day after day, she said.

"When properties are untouched, it gives a feeling of hopelessness," Maier said. "It's just a feeling of, are we ever going to get out of this?"

Parsells said he tries to encourage complaining homeowners to be understanding.

In an effort to give people time to rebuild, Toms River officials waited nearly a year before code enforcement officers began inspecting storm-damaged properties late last month. Letters notifying property owners of problems are now being sent.

"The township completely understands that not all personal situations are the same and we are committed to working with property owners to work toward acceptable solutions as long as a workable schedule can be developed," according to a recent notice announcing the initiative on the township's website.

The inspections were prompted by an increasing number of complaints about unmaintained properties, said Mayor Thomas F. Kelaher. Inspectors have discovered everything from overgrown lots infested with vermin to caved-in homes and structures that remain off their foundations.

"People are down and we don't want to burst their windpipe, however it's getting to a point



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where after a year that it's obvious that people have just plain walked away, whether it's out of frustration or financial means," the mayor said.

After recently inspecting 2,000 homes in the Ortley Beach section, one of the hardest-hit areas on the Seaside Heights barrier island, officials identified 371 homes as vacant or abandoned, said Debbi Winogracki, the township's public information officer. More inspections were scheduled for the mainland and other township sections north of Lavallette.

Letters are also being sent to owners for violations such as failing to remove storm-related debris or for the presence of vermin.

If owners fail to respond, additional letters will be sent informing them of the violations. The town could then either clean up the property or demolish the structures, Winogracki said. Liens would be placed on those properties to reimburse the town, she said.

"I think people will be happy to have it done and it will be a big weight lifted," she said of unresponsive homeowners whose homes might be demolished by the town. "It's for the overall benefit and safety of the residents."

Linda Pagliuca, who lives on Fifth Avenue in Ortley Beach, said she's been concerned about the neglected homes, including a boarded-up ranch house across the street. She also wonders about the toxicity associated with mold spreading in those homes. After months of repairs to fix a house with 5 feet of water, Pagliuca hopes to move back in by the end of November.

"This is the depressing part," she said, looking out on her street. "I don't want to wake up and look at that every day."

"The people who live here [year-round] have been trying to put it back together as best we can," she said.

In Sea Bright, half of the residential properties in the downtown area remain uninhabited, Mayor Dina Long said. Much of the delay in rebuilding can be attributed to owners waiting for grant money. About 65 homeowners have been approved but not yet received funds through the Homeowner Reconstruction, Rehabilitation, Elevation and Mitigation Program that offers up to \$150,000 to repair homes, Long said.

The town wanted to wait until the end of summer to give homeowners, especially owners whose homes are not primary residences, a chance to renovate.

“Since Labor Day, we’re taking it complaint by complaint and block by block with code enforcement,” she said, adding that summonses are now being issued after warnings were given.

Through the borough, residents can also seek help from volunteers to clean up or maintain their properties, Long said.

“We’re trying not to hit them when they’re down, and [we] offer them a resource to help them clean up,” she said. “As a mayor, I’m concerned with restoring property values in Sea Bright as quickly as possible, and having derelict properties doesn’t do anything to advance that goal.”

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**Susan Biroc** · ★ Top Commenter · Wayne Hills High School

Get on the phone with Christie. Or better yet go give him a visit. He was given billions of dollars from government to help the victims of Sandy. You deserve that money. It's sitting in the NJ treasury while with insurance companies or relying on the kindness of others to help him. Don't let him keep that mo for you.

Reply ·  1 · Like · October 8 at 4:40am



**Suz Protz** · ★ Top Commenter · Fairleigh Dickinson University

And there was also a concert held for that purpose. There still has to be money left.

Reply ·  1 · Like · October 8 at 8:56am



**Lin Clendenny** · ★ Top Commenter · Aventura, Florida

Suz Protz homeowners have not seen one penny of the concert money!

Reply · 1 · Like · October 8 at 1:15pm



**Mea Culpa** · ★ Top Commenter

I don't understand one thing. I have friends who live in Massachusetts, along the shore. They live in h years old and regularly get POUNDED by nor'easter storms and tropical storms and yet the houses ar show no signs of falling apart any time in the near future. What the hell happened down at the shore? houses made from? Toothpicks?

Reply · 2 · Like · October 8 at 7:02am



**Theo Culbertson** · Tenafly, New Jersey

Mea Culpa: This wasn't the case of a simple nor'easter. The waves were three stories high, smashing houses. The force of the incoming water was so strong it moved boulders several hundred feet from t street off the beach that runs parallel with the ocean. The ground under east side of some of the ocea quickly and deeply eroded that houses lost their footing and collapsed. The ocean breached the barrie ramming water right through homes and knocking them down or washing them out into the ocean or i damage speaks more to the power of the storm than to the structure of the homes. This was a disaste of the word and did nothing less than demonstrate how strong mother nature can be. Your friendsd in very fortunate their houses are intact and were not exposed to the fury of SuperStorm Sandy.

Reply · Like · October 8 at 8:54am



**Mea Culpa** · ★ Top Commenter

I understand your point, but my point is that the houses in Massachusetts are over 200 yea standing strong, so they've endured over 200 years of storms and yes, flooding also.

Several years back, the federal government did a study on housing and construction codes and they found that housing and construction codes in New Jersey were by far the WORST : country. Something to think about when you rebuild private properties down there at the st expense of the taxpayers, please.

Reply · 1 · Like · October 8 at 9:30am



**Georgianna Hutter** · ★ Top Commenter

First of all, LBI is a sandbar not an island and therefore can be totally obliterated by such a Secondly, if you put yourself in harm's way, you cannot expect to survive nature's wrath in shoreline needs to further revert to federal lands status and let it be at that. Taxpayers acr not have to pay for foolish investments of private individuals. Build the high dunes that prot and let nature flouish for all.

Reply · Like · October 8 at 11:17am



**Marlene Kolodziej** · Iron Mountain

Mea Culpa - some of these houses WERE close to 200 years old, especially in the year-rour Beach. This was a "once in a 700 year" storm and there was literally a WALL of water that s which is on the Bay, not the Ocean. Two 13 foot high waves smashed into the town, creatin seen, similar to a Tsunami and far from the typical hurricane we are all use to on the East ( comparing this storm to all previous hurricanes and if you read the details on HOW the stor the nuances of the storm, it was anything BUT a hurricane, hence the term "Superstorm", s any other way.

Reply · 2 · Like · October 9 at 5:48pm



**Suz Protz** · ★ Top Commenter · Fairleigh Dickinson University

Not neglected pe se! This is a year later and there is still lots that has not "recovered." :(

Reply · Like · October 8 at 8:55am



**Lin Clendenny** · Top Commenter · Aventura, Florida

I hope I wish I pray,that Union Beach tear my house down!I got nothing from homeowners,barely any am not one red cent to rebuild or tear down,union beach condemned it,union beach threw us out of ot beach tear it down and cart it away.I am done!:(

Reply · 1 · Like · October 8 at 1:23pm



**Jody Burke**

Anyone need help rebuilding carey construction in vineland Modular home great prices I got one from friend did to love it Ranch 1544 sq ft \$61,000 with your foundation you get \$30.000 from ICC after yo order your house 6 to 8 week's an its in .. more to it then that but it's all worth it

Reply · 1 · Like · October 12 at 7:51am

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