

INVESTIGATIONS



'Afraid to go through my own yard': Muskego Way residents pressure city to deal with abandoned home

**Sophia Vento**

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Published 6:00 a.m. CT July 12, 2023 | Updated 4:20 p.m. CT July 13, 2023

For years, Muskego Way residents have complained of raccoons scurrying in their yards, overgrown trees slumping across property lines and gaping holes in the roof of a vacant home on South 24th Street.

But despite pressure from neighborhood groups and repeated repair orders issued by the city's Department of Neighborhood Services, the state of the home has not changed, with one neighbor deeming it "a total loss."

As long as the property owner continues to pay his property taxes and city-issued fines, the department says there is little it can do until the house deteriorates to the point that it can be condemned and razed.

DNS is no stranger to complaints about its ability to get homeowners and landlords to clean up unkempt properties. In 2022, the Journal Sentinel reported similar concerns of an owner-occupied property on the east side. A 2016 investigation revealed Milwaukee landlords racking up building violation fines but not making the city-ordered repairs.

Yet officials are unsure of a solution. Ald. JoCasta Zamarripa, whose district includes Muskego Way, said she is uncertain about additional legislative action the city could take.

"I don't know if anybody has the solution," added Ald. Robert Bauman, vice chair of the city's Zoning, Neighborhoods and Development Committee.

Research shows that vacant and abandoned properties are linked to increased crime rates and health risks, as well as reduced property values and resident confidence in the future of

their neighborhood, according to the Center for Community Progress.

Milwaukee homeowners, according to DNS operations director Kristen Reed, are generally compliant with city building code and the department's enforcement mechanisms. She described properties like the one in Muskego Way as "outliers."



'Afraid to go through my own yard'

For Elia Duran Vazquez and her family, the dilapidated home on the 1600 block of South 24th Street is not just a visual nuisance but a physical one. Two years ago, a tree from the property fell onto her pale-yellow home. Her family completed the clean-up on their own, Vazquez said.

At least a dozen raccoons also live on the property, triggering her son's asthma, according to Vazquez, who said she "can't put anything in the yard because they destroy everything."

If the property were to be cleaned up, "I wouldn't be afraid to go through my own yard," she said. "I wouldn't be afraid that the animals would come into my house. I would go out with more confidence."

The property owner, John Baxter, did not respond to calls or emails regarding the condition of the building.

The city has documented problems at Baxter's property for years. Most recently, in 2021, building inspectors found missing windows panes and holes in the roof at the property and ordered Baxter to make the repairs, according to DNS records.

Later that year, the city charged Baxter \$1,270 for failing to make the repairs and not registering his property as vacant. Baxter appealed the fine, pleading that he planned to move back into the house that December after completing work on the property.

"I'm doing the work myself working full time," Baxter wrote. "[I'm] just asking for more time."

But by May 2023, little work had been done, inspectors found. The city re-issued the same violations and added more, including defective rain gutters and walls not in "rodentproof condition."

Baxter has until July 31 to make the repairs. If he doesn't, he will be subject to monthly re-inspections and additional fees.

Zamarripa said multiple residents of Muskego Way — a family-oriented and largely middle-class Latino neighborhood — have approached her about the building. She said she visited the blighted property herself in 2022, snapping pictures of the holes in the roofs and overgrown trees, before having her staff submit an official complaint to DNS. However, on a neighborhood walk earlier this year, a resident approached the alderwoman to complain that the state of the property had not improved.

"I still am hoping we're going to find a solution for this neighborhood in particular," Zamarripa said. "I don't know if there is something legislative we can do."

Situations of this nature are ultimately disheartening for neighbors, said Alison Henderson, co-coordinator at the neighborhood improvement organization Muskego Way Forward.

"It's frustrating for everyone involved because we get to a point where we're talking about it constantly and we're trying to get everyone involved, but we get to an impasse where we have to say there's nothing else we can do," she said.

State law still dictates city policy

Bauman said the biggest factor restricting the city's ability to get homeowners to clean up their properties is state law.

Starting in 2011, Republican state lawmakers passed a series of pro-landlord legislation that stunted municipal housing authority, such as by capping city inspection fees. For some property owners, it is ultimately cheaper to pay the violation fees than make the repairs in accordance with city building code.

"We're pretty much stuck," Bauman said about the city and DNS. "It's beyond their control."

One of the architects of the efforts, Sen. Duey Stroebel, R-Saukville, said his intention "was not to shield absentee landlords and bad actors from accountability" but to reduce what he viewed as an overbearing regulatory environment. He said city officials are blaming the Legislature for their own problems.

However, the city says otherwise.

The legislative changes "greatly reduced our regulatory footprint," Reed said, emphasizing that state statute is "one of the biggest factors in limiting what we are able to do."

In an effort to boost compliance, Reed said DNS increased its monthly re-inspection fee in January from \$350 to \$400. Initial inspection fees also increased from \$175 to \$200. It's too early to tell whether the change worked.



Striking a balance between holding neglectful property owners accountable and supporting low-income homeowners struggling to make repairs is of utmost importance, she added.

"We just continue to reach out to them to try and gain compliance," Reed said. "There's just going to be some cases that are difficult."

Community organizations fill in the gaps

Reed also highlighted the importance of DNS's partnerships with local organizations such as the Reclaiming Our Neighborhoods (RON) Coalition.

In 2022, the coalition surveyed nearly 20,000 properties in 15 neighborhoods, including Muskego Way, and found that a quarter were in need of at least one major repair. The coalition is now preparing to reach out to homeowners to connect them to city or nonprofit programs that provide resources for home repairs.

Henderson, who works with the RON Coalition through Muskego Way Forward, said these efforts are an additional means to make progress on the issue of nuisance properties in Milwaukee.

"We're actually just starting to draft letters and different things from the coalition that allows us to communicate with these property owners on a different level," Henderson added.

Reed underscored that such community organizations can be a "little less scary" for some property owners to collaborate with instead of the city.

Ultimately, though, for properties such as the one on South 24th Street, residents continue to question what more can be done as community organizations fill the gap.

“People who are invested in their community and in their neighborhood just want a good quality of life,” Henderson said. “They just want to be happy and at peace.”

Resources for homeowners:



The DNS Compliance Loan Program provides 0% interest, deferred-payment loans to homeowners to address building code violations.

The city’s STRONG Home Loans Program offers partially-forgivable loans of up to \$20,000 to owner-occupants to make essential home repairs and address building code violations.

Take Root Milwaukee offers free or low-cost services to help people buy, keep or fix their homes.

Sophia Vento is the Sharon Stark Investigative Intern with the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel’s investigations and watchdog team. Contact her atsvento@gannett.com.