



CAMDEN CITY NEWS

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After multiple delays, Camden starts to demolish abandoned homes





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Demolition of 1510 Louis St. in Camden, the first of 62 abandoned properties scheduled to get torn down. Tuesday, January 20, 2015.(Photo: JOHN ZIOMEK/COURIER-POST)Buy Photo

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Camden Mayor Dana L. Redd took the first ceremonial crunch out of an abandoned home on Louis Street in the Whitman Park section of the city Tuesday morning.

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Contractors then made short work of 1510 Louis St., an abandoned property owned by Ollie M. Cuff, 72, a former city police clerical employee.

Cuff, a Lindenwold resident, retired after 26 years with the city in 2012, two years into the Redd administration. Cuff had walked away from the Louis Street property in 2004.

The city used federal money — a Community Block Development Grant of \$970,000 — to cover the \$15,306 cost of tearing down Cuff's derelict home.



Demolition crew knocks down the building at 1510 Louis St. in Camden, the first of 62 abandoned properties scheduled to get torn down. Tuesday, January 20, 2015. (Photo: JOHN ZIOMEK/Courier-Post,

JOHN ZIOMEK/COURIER-POST)

Mayor Dana Redd sits in the excavator prior to ceremoniously knocking down a piece of the building at 1510 Louis St. in Camden, the first of 62 abandoned properties scheduled to get torn down. Tuesday,

January 20, 2015. (Photo: JOHN ZIOMEK/Courier-Post, JOHN ZIOMEK/COURIER-POST)

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The rest of the money from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is earmarked to demolish an additional 61 properties in phase one — the first planned demolitions in the city in decades.

However, Cuff is legally liable to pay the cost of demolition. The city, though, has not said if it will hold Cuff and other identifiable property owners liable for reimbursing demolition payments.

While defending the project, U.S. Rep. Donald Norcross, D-Camden, the lone federal official at the ceremony, said the city "could have done this better and quicker."

He added he was unfamiliar with the particulars of Cuff's ownership, though he said as the homeowner she should be responsible for the home and its upkeep and the city must be responsible for assuring that all money is spent appropriately.

Norcross added that Cuff's abandoned home needed to be down as part of "bringing the neighborhood" — and the rest of Camden — back.

The city plans to remove another 531 properties in a second phase. Contracts are signed, but there is no firm start date. The city also has removed about 450 properties since Jan. 2010 through emergency declarations after fires, collapses or falling debris.

Camden County Police Chief Scott Thomson, who knew Cuff from her time working for the city police department, said her Louis Street home had recently served as a stash house. Criminals had placed a safe with a shotgun and drug wrappers there.

Camden County Freeholder Jeffrey L. Nash referred to Cuff as a "slumlord," even though she had never rented out her property.

Also: [Abandoned buildings in city magnets for fires, danger](#)

Nash later said he meant the slumlord reference "generically" as part of a warning that the owners of derelict properties will be held accountable.

However, that historically has not been the case in Camden.

According to the city's responses to Open Public Records Act requests, Camden has not taken any landowners to court or collected any fines from 2010 to present.

The city has justified its approach by saying tracking down owners is not cost-effective because of the time and expense involved.



Camden Churches Organized for People worker Kristen Zielinski-Nalen speaks with Juana Placencia. Placencia hopes the city finally demolishes 936 N. 19th St., an abandoned home without a roof that adjoins hers.

After taking a bite out of Cuff's home, Redd admitted she had no idea a former city worker owned the two-story building until her administration was contacted by a Courier-Post reporter on Monday.

The city's contractor, Tricorn, picked Cuff's home to showcase the first demolition because it stands alone, making it easier to safely demolish.

Cuff said Tuesday that she never intended to abandon the home, but after squatters broke in and took out her windows she could not afford to replace them and she never returned.

She also said she cannot afford to pay for the demolition and she wondered why the city had singled out her property when it intends to tear down about 600 properties.

"Are they going after the other 600 (property owners)? How is that fair? They should pick on everyone else," Cuff said.

Cuff, who did not object to the demolition, said the city has never sent her any unsafe building notices or a notification of demolition to her current address, which she had given to the city when she moved a decade ago.

However, property tax records still list Cuff's address as Louis Street, which is where the city sent violation notices. Cuff's true address in Lindenwold is easily findable, a search that took a reporter just minutes.



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Redd said "in an ideal world" the city could have searched for a better address for Cuff.

City lawyer Marc Riondino and construction official James Rizzo said the city had followed the law with notifications. A request to the administration for copies of notifications was not fulfilled Tuesday.

Redd said the city will look to improve how it handles future notifications.

City officials did not respond to a request for comment on whether or not Cuff is current with taxes.

Juana Placencia, whose home on the 900 block of North 19th Street adjoins a collapsing home owned by the city's redevelopment agency, left the press conference frustrated.

She has been trying to secure a mortgage to buy the homes she now rents, but lenders have refused to sign off until they know the city is finally taking down the derelict building next door, threatening hers.

She was told only that it will be taken down within 120 days.

City officials said they have identified about 1,600 abandoned homes in the city, which would leave 1,000 that it says it plans to stabilize and repurpose.

However, a community group that mapped the city has said the true count for all abandoned buildings in the city is more than 3,400

Demolition program hopes to bring new life to Camden



By [John Rawlins](#)

Tuesday, January 20, 2015 05:59PM

CAMDEN, N.J. (WPVI) --

Camden officials have big plans to revitalize the city with new businesses. But before they can build, they have to demolish hundreds of abandoned homes.

This morning Mayor Dana Redd sat in the cab of a mechanical excavator and took the first bite out of

1510 Louis Street.

It was the beginning of a planned \$9 million effort by the city to demolish 590 plus abandon buildings that often become drug stash houses.

Congressman Donald Norcross said at a ceremony today, "These are crime factories. This is where things that we read about in the paper start to occur."

1510 Louis Street has such a history.

Camden County Police Chief John Thomson explains, "We pulled a gun safe out that had a gun in there, packaging material for narcotics and drugs in of itself."

After tearing down the derelict buildings the long term goal to attract developers to build more attractive market rate housing.

Camden has enticed employers, like the site where Subaru will locate. The hope is that some workers will want to live in town.

To succeed, developers say Camden will have to copy Philadelphia's example by offering tax abatements to new home buyers.

Mayor Redd says that's being considered.

Redd tells us, "I know Northern Liberties is popping. I have been there to visit to see things happening there in Philadelphia. I think Camden's on the cutting edge in that we have great partners at the table. And I would say it's in short order - it's definitely being discussed, debated."

Existing residents are hopeful.

Resident Felix Dunn says, "With better housing we will have less drug trafficking, less this and that. But it's going to make the community a better community."

However, residents also say more jobs are a must.

Dennis Hitchens of Camden says job creation would, "get a lot of people off the streets. People want jobs."

By mid-afternoon Tuesday 1510 Louis Street was reduced to a pile of rubble. For the new city demolition program it was one down, 592 to go