



Final Report: Code Enforcement Work Group

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OVERVIEW

In order to achieve a better Baltimore County, the general well-being of individuals and communities have to continually be examined. It is known that Baltimore County is home to many diverse communities, many rich in culture and history.

It is important for the economic well-being of the county for the residential property owners, commercial property owners, business-owners and visitors exist in a clean and safe environment. Baltimore County's department of Permits, Approvals and Inspections (PAI) has been— and will continue to be—an integral part of ensuring that the residents of this diverse county are experiencing a positive quality of life.

It is clear to the PAI team, and me, that residents have varying degrees of understanding what the department's role is in county operations.

BACKGROUND

For the purposes of this report I will focus on code enforcement's core functions, including:

- Investigating residential and commercial complaints, and updating weekly Complaint Reports for properties that are investigated to determine if a code violation exists
- Sweeping or ticketing neighborhoods for code violations
- Approving various licenses, permits (examples include motel or hotel, towing and trailers)
- Conducting inspections for housing choice voucher programs
- Managing the Rat Eradication Extermination Program, which provides rodent control information to the public and enforces County regulations addressing the root causes of rodent infestation
- Enforcing the Rental Registration License Program for all rental property owners and addressing public nuisance complaints for dwellings subject to the Rental Housing Registration Law

The code enforcement leadership team is comprised of Chief Lionel Van Dommelen, Supervisors Adam Whitlock and Justin Olszewski and eighteen inspectors who are charged with maintaining and improving the standards of a community by enforcing the Baltimore County Code and Baltimore County Zoning Regulations.

In 2019, code enforcement inspectors responded to 21,953 total code complaints. These complaints are currently submitted in a variety of ways including online, via email, phone or mail. Complaints are also submitted by elected officials and community associations.

As the Director, I often field questions and concerns from members of the general public and elected representatives regarding code enforcement. Currently, the team only performs off-hours inspections when responding to a complaint, rather than pro-actively on nights and weekends, when many violations occur.

CODE ENFORCEMENT WORKFORCE GOALS

An informal work group was assembled in early 2020 to engage in a stakeholder-driven discussion about Baltimore County's Code Enforcement program. The goal of this group, chaired by myself and co-chaired by Councilman Izzy Patoka, was to identify improvements to the program that will enable better service to the citizens of the County.

The committee members from each councilmanic district are below. Each Council member was asked to nominate an active community member to represent their district, with a few committee members added by recommendation of the Office of Community Engagement.

District	Committee Member Name
1	Valerie Schwaab
2	Airuel Singletary
3	Eric Rockel
4	Vivian Paysour
5	Greg Bauer
6	Caitlin Klimm-Kellner
7	Cliff O'Connell

THEMES

Throughout the course of the three work group meetings, a few common issues were discussed including communication, increased resources (in terms of budget and staffing), technology and stronger more consistent code enforcement.

SURVEY

In order for the general public to have input an online survey was posted for the public to submit their anonymous comments on the code enforcement division as a whole. Ten responses were received. Two questions were asked, the responses were weighed and there were seven written comments provided. In one question, citizens ranked available resources, timeliness in enforcement, the Office of Administrative Hearings (ALJ) and vacant properties.

In sum, 60% thought there were inadequate enforcement resources (inspectors), 20% thought timeliness was an issue and 20% had vacant property concerns. The second question was a satisfaction ranking. The areas in question were one, the OAH came out on top, followed by timeliness, resources and vacant properties.

In the written narratives the themes generally reflected the survey results and some of the work group discussions ranging from the lack of timely action, the sentiment that code enforcement is one cause of community deterioration, section 8 blight and the need to overhaul the entire division.

BACKGROUND

At the conclusion of the Work Group, the committee unanimously made the following recommendations:

- 1. Establish special “revolving” fund** from revenue generated from PIA code related fines, liens and fees collected from citations. These funds, estimated to be upwards of \$2 million dollars per fiscal year, will be allocated to a separate account to be earmarked for repairing derelict structures and other code enforcement remediation efforts such as exploring new rat eradication techniques.
- 2. Pro-active and off-hour Inspections:** To assist shift from reactive to proactive enforcement; including off-hours inspections. Rather than having code enforcement only address complaints, the inspectors would patrol their respective zones and send out correction notices accordingly. The off-hours inspections would include regularly scheduled code enforcement inspectors working in the evenings and in particular the weekends to address issues that regularly occur when the inspectors are not currently working. Two or three positions for additional inspectors would need to be created to execute the off-hours inspections.
- 3. Multi-family unit inspection program:** While this would be a new program to Baltimore County, most jurisdictions throughout the state have an established program to inspect and license multifamily residential rental dwellings of seven or more units. There are an estimated 340 complexes and over 78,000 additional units in Baltimore County that would be included in this program. If an annual license fee was implemented of \$25 per unit, over \$1.9 million dollars would be generated annually. This program would also create seven new rental inspector positions who would be hired, plus overhead, to provide yearly inspections and enforcement in all seven council districts. This program would also improve the existing six or less unit inspection program by providing stronger inspection protocols. It would bring staff to specifically address what the committee members strongly stated were problems with the existing already licensed, and some undetected, rental properties throughout the county. Additional discussions include bonding landlords and rental properties, holding landlords, not tenants, accountable for all infractions, and looking to narrow the definition of the number of unrelated occupants in a dwelling. This program did receive stakeholder buy-in, and will require legislative action.
- 4. Additional code enforcement staff:** Related to item 2 and 3 above, there was a robust discussion about how many fewer active inspectors there are now, approximately 20, compared to a decade ago when there were 34; even though the County population has grown. The sentiment of the committee was to add inspectors as the budget provides.
- 5. Expand ALJ for faster and live streaming adjudication:** Add a third Judge to provide faster turnaround for hearings. Additionally, improve transparency by providing live streaming.
- 6. Maximize technology:** This is an area that the work group felt the County could benefit greatly from having one central information system. A system where all violations (written and verbal) are recorded and viewable by the general public. There is also a need to establish a schedule for Acela updates. The county could also greatly from live-streaming ALJ hearings.
- 7. Proactive Resident Engagement:** The work group had robust discussions and agreement that Baltimore County must make communications available in the languages used by our residents in a variety of formats to include digital, print and social media. It is also prudent of the county to leverage the Office of Community Engagement coordinators and external community stakeholder groups to disseminate information to new and existing residents alike.

8. **Vacant property registry:** Leverage best practices from other jurisdictions to stand up a program similar to the City of Salisbury, Maryland, where owners of vacant residential and commercial properties will be required to register with Baltimore County on an annual basis or be subject to a fine and liens.
9. **Improved sign, trash and litter, private and business property maintenance code enforcement:** Related to pro-active inspections, having inspectors vigorously enforcement the current laws the county currently abides by, such as the 2015/2018 Property Maintenance Code. Additionally, when pulling random illegal signs, send the owners correction notices and follow up to adjudication to keep it from reoccurring. Repeat offenders posting illegal signs should be sent correction notices, followed by adjudication. Consistent issuance of penalties for those dumping trash, which are often dismissed.
10. **Code Inspector Training Program:** Establish a training curriculum for code inspectors to include annual department policies and procedures training, safety training including de-escalation techniques to be delivered by the Baltimore County Police Department as well as technology and soft skills training.

***Note:** the work group emphasized that the rat eradication program is strongly supported and that there is a strong desire for continued funding and expansion into additional communities. They also encouraged the use of innovative eradication technologies as they become available.

The following documents are available upon request: February 28, 2020 Meeting Minutes, April 2, 2020 Meeting Minutes, April 9, 2020 Meeting Minutes, the multi-family Inspection Program Decision Memo and survey results.