

HOME PRICES SHOW RESILIENCE

Pittsburgh home sales slow, yet prices rise

By Tim Grant
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

With their home under contract to be sold this month, the clock is ticking for Jannon and Christine Zubchevich. They still haven't found a house to buy and, meanwhile, mortgage rates keep edging higher.

"I look every day. And I'm not seeing anything come up," Ms. Zubchevich, 33, said.

It was easy enough for the couple to find a buyer for their two-bedroom townhouse in Brighton Heights, a home they bought three years ago. They've outgrown it with the birth of their baby boy and have more plans to expand the family.

It's been much harder to find something they can afford to buy in the North Hills — one of the region's most

sought-after areas — while Pittsburgh remains one of the strongest seller's markets in the country.

One year into a stretch in which the cost of borrowing for a home has nearly doubled as interest rates soared, home prices on average in the Pittsburgh region have continued to climb.

That's not true for every neighborhood. While the majority of Pittsburgh's leading neighborhoods posted higher

SEE **HOUSING**, PAGE A-6

Area home sales price comparison

The following shows the average sales price for Jan. 2023 versus Jan. 2022 for Allegheny and four other area counties.

	2022	2023	% change
Allegheny	\$260K	\$266K	+2.3%
Butler	\$302K	\$335K	+10.9%
Beaver	\$213K	\$168K	-21.1%
Washington	\$278K	\$270K	-2.9%
Westmoreland	\$215K	\$213K	-0.9%

Source: West Penn Multi-List Ed Yozwick/Post-Gazette



Workers removing wreckage left by a rail car derailment stand back while a freight train passes Thursday in East Palestine, Ohio.

PG SPECIAL REPORT: EAST PALESTINE AFTERMATH

WAITING GAME

As East Palestine, Ohio, officials continue to grapple with the impact of the fiery train derailment of Feb. 3, residents face difficult choices in returning to homes they fear may not be safe.

They worry about water and air quality, citing lingering chemical odors from creeks and potential exposure to

byproducts from a controlled explosive puncturing of rail cars last week.

And business owners await air quality testing before they can reopen. Some question whether their inventory will be safe to sell.

Can the village ever be the same? Read a Post-Gazette special report in **Local, C-1**.



North Market Street in East Palestine, deserted after the derailment Feb. 3, shows signs of life late last week. But some businesses still have not reopened.

PG INVESTIGATION UPDATE

Advocates wage battle to take over city's unsafe properties

By Michael Korsh
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

For Charles King, the dangerous and dilapidated home next door in Garfield has been an eyesore for years.

The stairs, porch, decks, and balconies are badly broken down — but the worst problem is what's inside.

Despite Mr. King's relentless calls to the owner of the house — the city of Pittsburgh — a nursery of raccoons has not only taken over the abandoned structure, but they've run wild in his house as well.

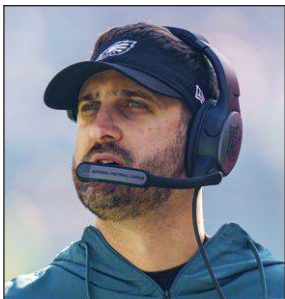
"I probably average about 20 a year, catching raccoons," he said.

The abandoned home is among dozens of condemned structures that have been pushed as evidence in a court battle that will decide whether the city loses control of some of its troubled real estate portfolio and allows community groups to step in and manage the homes — now located in nearly every neighborhood.

With scores of those houses in perpetual decay, community groups are pushing in Allegheny County Common Pleas Court in a dramatic move to help rid the city of a backlog of properties that have been languishing, in some cases for generations.

The petition by Wholesale Properties LLC and other groups to step in under

SEE **TAKEOVER**, PAGE A-7



Associated Press
Nick Sirianni will be the Philadelphia Eagles head coach in the Super Bowl.

Brotherly love

By Brian Batko
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

When you walk into Mike Sirianni's office on the historic campus of Washington & Jefferson College, a few items of memorabilia stand out. Sure, there are photos and awards that commemorate his own coaching accomplishments. But then you look closer and see the auto-

graphed ball with the Philadelphia Eagles logo, another of both his girls posing with Eagles star quarterback Jalen Hurts.

Mr. Sirianni is now two decades into his tenure at Washington & Jefferson, a perennial power in the Presidents' Athletic Conference. He's had a winning season all 20 years he has been at the helm, with a career record of 176-42.

Eagles coach has reached the grand stage — his brother's influence is a big reason why

Only twice has Mr. Sirianni tried to give his youngest brother career advice. The first was a suggestion to join him on the W&J coaching staff. The second was to stay at the Division III level, at their beloved alma mater Mount Union, rather than hurriedly climb the ladder of college coaching.

SEE **BROTHERS**, PAGE A-5



Brian Batko photo
Mike Sirianni coaches the Washington & Jefferson football team.

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Housing advocates wage legal battle to take over Pittsburgh's troubled properties

TAKEOVER, FROM A-3

the state's Abandoned and Blighted Property Conservatorship Act represents an unprecedented effort by housing advocates to make an impact on some of Pittsburgh's most devastated neighborhoods, where nearly one in five city-owned properties have been slapped with code or health violations, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette found.

During a court hearing Thursday, the city pledged to fight the effort by pressing for a stay while its lawyers appeal a judge's decision that allowed the community groups to move forward with their case.

Lawyers for the groups, including the Bloomfield-Garfield Corp. and East Liberty Development Inc., argued that the city has failed not only to keep up the distressed properties and weedy, barren lots, but to get them back on the tax rolls.

A Pittsburgh Post-Gazette investigation, which was cited during Thursday's court hearing, found the city has been accumulating old and dilapidated properties — nearly 5,000 homes and barren lots in all — for unpaid taxes and liens.

But unlike many other older Rust Belt cities, the city failed to regularly sell the properties or tear them down, including some the city acquired in the 1960s.

The legal push to move about 75 properties under a conservatorship is the latest effort by housing advocates to force the city into addressing the many houses that have become fire traps and lures for crime in neighborhoods from Homewood to Perry South.

Weapon to fight blight

Enacted more than a decade ago, the Conservatorship Act empowered groups to take on blight if owners of the properties were failing to do so.

While the law was used mostly against private owners, the petition filed in 2021 takes on local government for the first time, in what has become a test case.

The city has argued that the law does not apply, saying the government reserves the right to take over properties for unpaid taxes and other delinquencies — and that it does not address private entities taking properties.

Attorneys for the community groups say the law applies to the city because it failed to develop a comprehensive plan not only to keep up the properties but to find ways to offload them.

Despite the city's protests, Judge John McVay Jr. ruled last month that the community organizations could indeed use the conservatorship law as a tool — and that his decision should serve as a wake-up call for officials.

"If the [city of Pittsburgh] wishes to not have specific properties subject to conservatorship petitions, it has options, such as actively marketing those properties, maintaining the properties that are not already blighted, or arguing that it has a plan for public use or recommending its own conservator be appointed," the judge wrote.

Despite multiple requests for interviews, the city's lawyers, Krysia Kubiak and John DeMarco, declined to comment.

Though the judge said he would decide on whether to grant Pittsburgh's request for a stay, attorneys for the community groups said they were concerned about any delay.

"We have to get movement, because a glacial pace is not in the interest of the community," Wayne Cobb II, the plaintiffs' lead lawyer, told the judge.

He and other lawyers for the groups have alleged in their pleadings that the city has "failed to take reasonable and necessary measures" and in the process, the properties are rapidly deteriorating.

To make their point, they have turned to a boarded-up, clapboard home in Troy Hill, built more than a century ago, as a prime example.

Shards of glass are scattered on the back porch of the home on Straubs Lane, while the inside is piled with broken, upside-down furniture and empty food cans.

The property, which has been slapped with nearly \$8,000 in liens because of unpaid taxes, was bought by the city for about \$15,000 in September 2017, court records show.

Nearly a year later, inspectors visited the house twice — both times deeming it as an "unsafe structure" and issuing code violations, records show.

After visiting the home along with other properties owned by the city, real estate investor Aaron Chaney said he began looking for ways to pull houses like the one on Straubs Lane from the city's control.

"You look around and see all these houses rotting away. It just breaks my heart. And most of them are city-owned — the city takes these properties through tax sale, and then sits on them and does nothing," Mr. Chaney said.

Mr. Chaney came across the Conservatorship Act as a potential avenue for community organizations to take on responsibility for the properties.

He began talking to those groups to see if they wanted to join in the effort. Since then, he has filed more than 20 petitions for conservatorship on behalf of the organizations to initiate the action.

If such a petition is granted, the groups would



John Colombo/For the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Rick Swartz is executive director of Bloomfield-Garfield Corporation, one of the groups that have joined in a legal battle to take over many of the city-owned properties that have languished for years in blighted Pittsburgh neighborhoods. The home at 5137 Broad St. was purchased by the city in 2016. Since then, it has been deemed an "unsafe structure" and condemned.

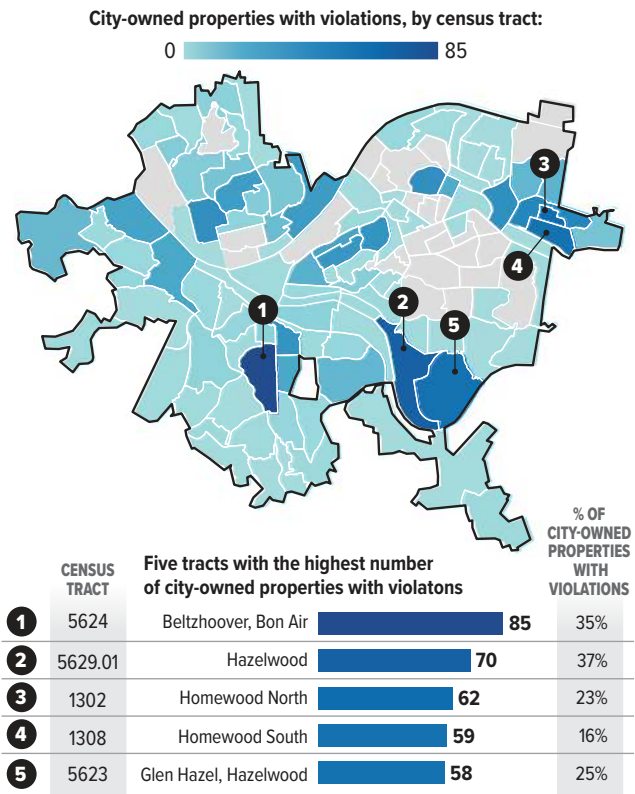


Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Of the nearly 5,000 structures and vacant lots owned by the city of Pittsburgh, one in five — like this one on Straubs Lane in Troy Hill — have been hit with code or health violations.

City-owned properties racking up violations

Out of nearly 5,000 properties owned by the city of Pittsburgh, 1,032 (20.8%) were found to have property code and/or health violations. In the city's real estate portfolio, the census tract of Beltzhoover and Bon Air had the most properties — 85 — charged with violations.



Source: Allegheny County property assessments

Research: Michael Korsh
Graphic: Ed Yozwick/Post-Gazette

assume management of the troubled properties under court supervision, but the city would still own the homes and lots.

Even under such an arrangement, the task of revitalizing most of the properties remains costly.

Just to renovate the home in Troy Hill, at least \$50,000 would be needed, court

records show. To tear it down, the average cost would be about \$45,000 in taxpayer dollars.

Fierce legal battle

Lawyers for the community groups argue they can help raise the kind of money needed for such a large undertaking.

The city argues that it has been put in a difficult position because to fend off the move by the community groups, it will be forced to come up with massive amounts of money to meet the challenges of upgrading the properties — or lose them.

The law "places a new financial burden on municipalities that own property," the city wrote.

Over the course of the last year, Judge McVay held a series of meetings between the community organizations and the city to try to come up with a solution to curb blight that both parties would accept, according to advocates and court records.

During a September discussion, it appeared the city was willing to allow a few select properties to move forward with conservatorship. But two months later, it changed course, again asking Judge McVay to decide



Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

This dilapidated and unsafe home owned by the city at 2115 Straubs Lane is among the many properties that housing advocates say need to be pulled out of the city's control and turned over to community groups fighting blight.

whether the law could be used against the city.

So, in December, Judge McVay held what he called an additional "pep talk" with the mayor's office, City Council and local nonprofits, to share his thoughts on conservatorship and the possibility of using the city's land bank as a tool to get the properties back on the tax roll.

"I had suggested that perhaps the underutilization and controversial land bank could be part of [a] solution to effectively and creatively address affordable housing and blighted properties collectively and asked for all parties' open-mindedness," Judge McVay wrote in his January ruling.

A Post-Gazette investigation found that the city launched a land bank program in 2014 — once touted as a mechanism to repair homes and get them back on the market — but it failed to acquire a single home in the first seven years of operation, while it spent hundreds of thousands on consultants and overhead.

Despite the judge's efforts to bring the sides together, the city wasn't budging.

Mr. Chaney said he was frustrated by the lack of cooperation, considering the scores of properties that continue to deteriorate.

"There's a solution that people are pushing forward, and the city is trying to block that. It's just insane," he said.

Calling conservatorship a "useful tool," the judge encouraged city officials in his January ruling to move toward a consent decree, "or at least implement a comprehensive plan to avoid its blighted properties being placed under conservatorship."

According to housing advocates, the city is also arguing that if it relinquishes control of the homes and

lots, the move could open the door to potential abuses of the conservatorship law by for-profit developers.

Mr. Chaney said any such argument is unfounded, since the law requires courts to fully oversee the terms of a conservatorship.

"I mean, what's controversial about that? And beyond that, the city has input as to who the conservator can be. Judge McVay has a lot of respect for the city and would definitely listen if the city didn't like the proposed conservator," said Mr. Chaney.

Ernie Hogan, executive director of the Pittsburgh Community Reinvestment Group, said his organization was among the first to push for the takeover of the city's parcels.

Ultimately, he said, the legal battle comes down to whether city officials are exempt from the same laws that hold private owners accountable for poor management of their real estate.

"Is the city immune? And if they are immune, does this just further entrench them to take their time?" Mr. Hogan said.

"Or is this a wake-up call, that they're going to start to figure out how to move forward with more effective recycling systems, so that we can start to address some of this pent-up opportunity in the city and put it to good use?"

Mr. King, the owner of the Garfield home that was invaded by raccoons, finally took recourse by suing the city for failing to take care of its condemned home.

"They're probably hoping I just die," said Mr. King, 61, a veteran Pittsburgh police officer. "I don't mean they want to kill me, but kind of just go away. But I'm not going to go away."

Michael Korsh:
mkorsh@post-gazette.com



John Colombo/For the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The outside of the condemned house at 5137 Broad St. in Garfield. A permit to demolish the building has been issued, a project that will cost an estimated \$85,750 in taxpayer dollars. The city of Pittsburgh purchased the house in 2016.