



Topeka: Changing the Culture of Property Maintenance

Mid-Project Report
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Goals of Property Maintenance



- Safety of people
- Protection of structures
- Maintenance of an attractive environment
- Maintain or increase property values

Status of Project



- Interviewed over 30 city leaders and staff
- Analyzed city and court data from 2015-2021
- Listened to community and non-profit partners
- Discussed preliminary findings
- Brainstormed recommendations with leaders and staff

Huge Benefits When Improve Property Condition



- Reduces crime, in particular gun-related violence



- Improves health of residents



- Raises surrounding property values by up to 30% just by greening a vacant lot



- Increases tax revenue for city and school district

More Good Property Maintenance Impacts

	Improve health		Preserve the city's iconic housing stock	
		Create neighborhood jobs	Allow seniors to age in place	Become a more resilient city
	Revitalize neighborhoods	Slow the decline of home ownership		Stop abandonment
		Improve school performance	Lower healthcare costs	Prevent displacement

Effective,
Equitable,
Cost-Efficient
Code
Enforcement



Goal for enforcement strategies is to cause owner to comply with least amount of intervention/resources

from:

**I'm going to
ignore you**

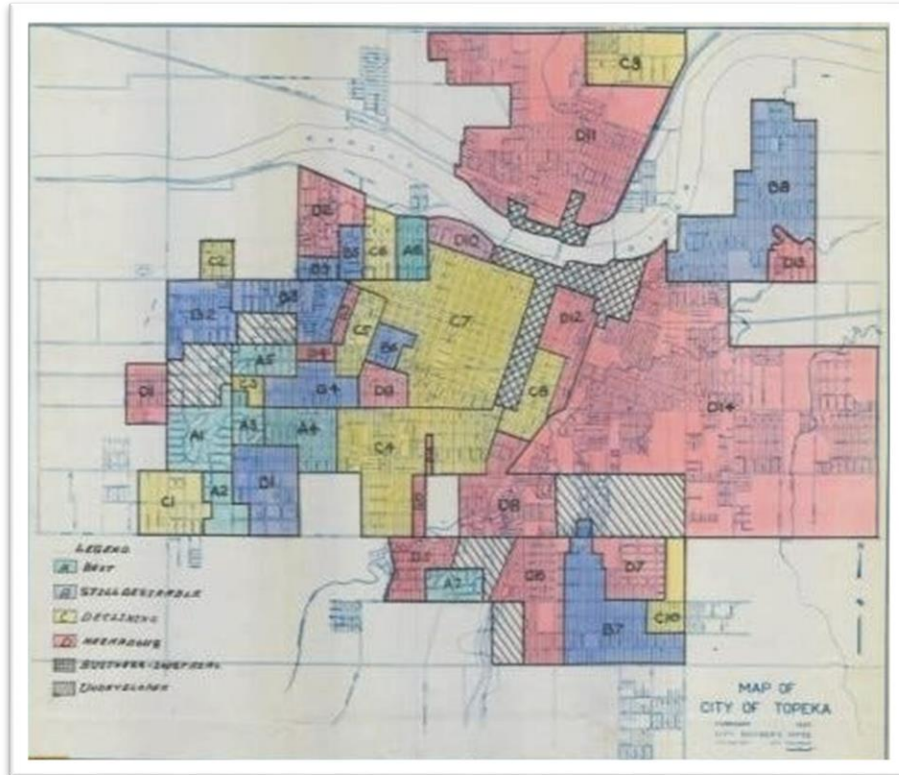
to:

**How much time do I
have to comply?**

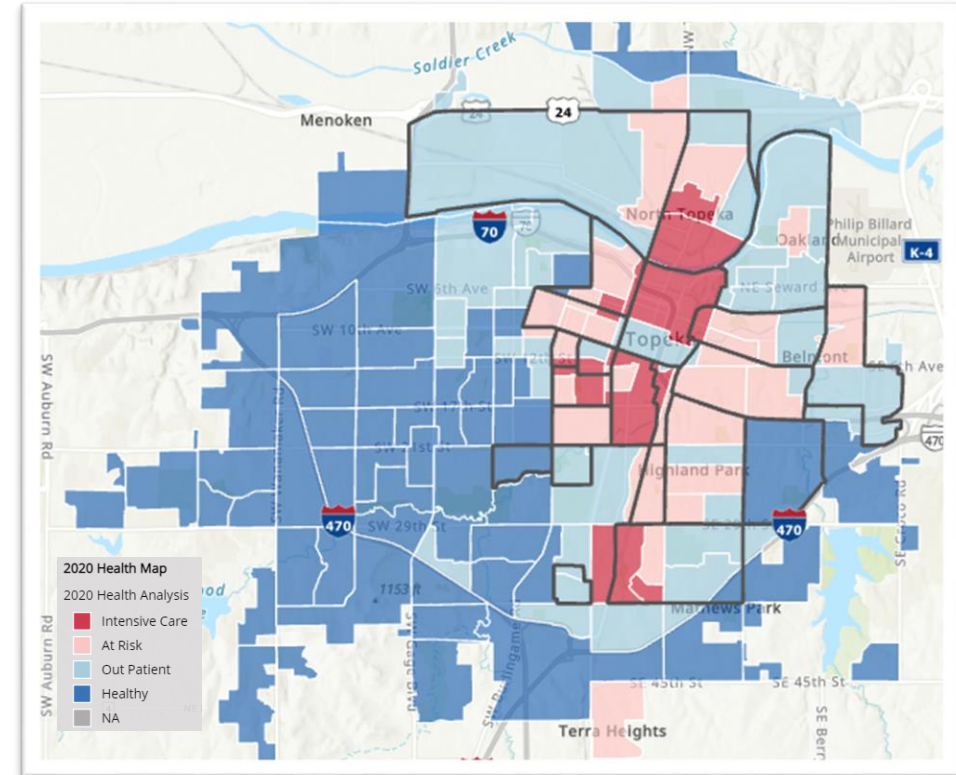
**...but I could
really use a
little help!**

Took Decades Of Disinvestment to Get Here

Home Ownership Loan Corp Topeka
1930's Redlining Map



City of Topeka Neighborhood Health
Maps (2020)



Code Enforcement Should Be Efficient

Educate owners of
standards to be met

Target willful
neglect of
properties

Focus on health and
safety

Coordinate with
police, fire &
partners

Collect and track
data regularly

Use courts to hold
owners accountable

Code Enforcement Must Be Equitable

Recognize different
types of owners and
properties

Ensure no one must
live in unhealthy,
unsafe conditions

Involve meaningful
community
partnerships

Assist vulnerable
owners who can not
afford repairs

Prevent
displacement

Limit use of criminal
fines or penalties



Topeka is doing many things right

- Focus on compliance not punishment
- Abate quickly and efficiently where owner won't act
- Complete 18,000 inspections per year
- Use SeeClickFix for resident complaints
- Use MyGov to track status of cases
- Have both civil and criminal court enforcement with knowledgeable judges
- Offer home repair for poor owners with violations



Key Data Findings



How many houses
have code
violations? (2015-
2021)

- 21,612 properties with code enforcement cases
- 100 of these properties have more than 15 cases



Who owns the houses with violations? (2015-2021)

- 15,713 owners have cases
- 28% of owners with cases are LLC's – 9 out of 10 owners with the most cases are LLC's
- Top 30 owners are responsible for 10% of cases



Code Enforcement Inspections

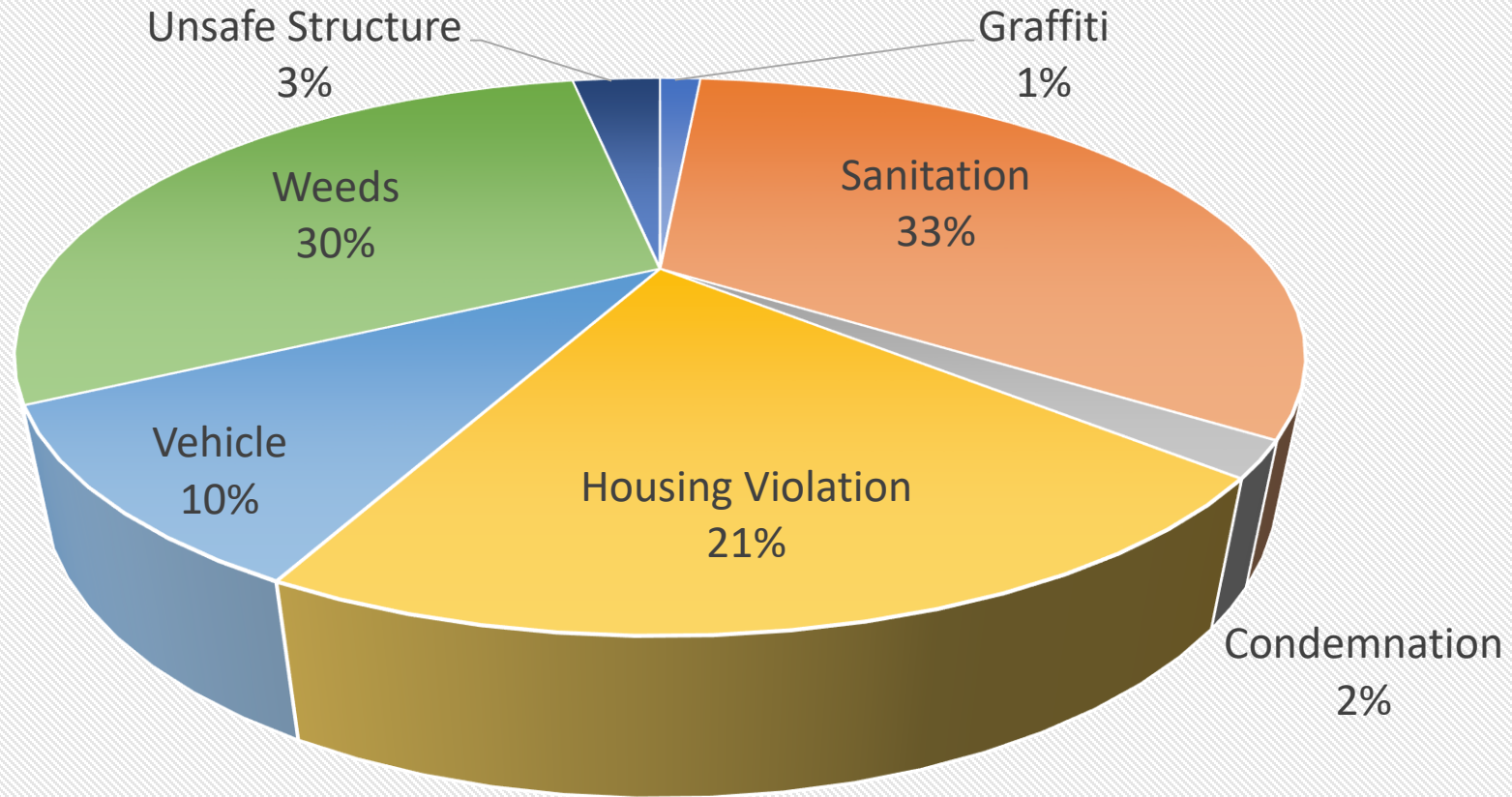
- City performs 18,000 inspections annually - average of 3 inspections per case
- Average time between complaint and inspection is 3 calendar days
- Average time between complaint and voluntary compliance is 43 days



What is
“voluntary
compliance”?

- 83% of cases closed for voluntary compliance
- Voluntary compliance definition is very broad - includes when the owner corrects or the case is sent to court
- Cases are also closed where there is a new owner or inaccurate address

What type of violations are properties cited for? (2015 – 2021)



*Vacant Registry not included



Who Initiates Code Cases? (2015-2021)

- 78% of cases are department initiated. Other 22% are initiated by complaints from the public, City Council or other departments
- 77% of inspections are exterior only



Abatements –
address violation
with public money
(2015-2021)

- City conducted 8000 abatements - mowing and removal of trash make up majority
- City spent \$2.2 million on abatements - \$1.4 million (64%) were repaid by owners
- 17% of properties received more than one abatement (e.g. owner of 21 properties received 105 sanitation abatements)



Municipal Court – Criminal Enforcement (2015-2021)

- 50% of time arraignment for housing violations results in continuance – owner may receive up to six 60-day continuances
- Only 2 owners brought to trial and found guilty of a criminal misdemeanor
- 4% of owners fail to appear and bench warrants are issued



Administrative Hearing – Civil Enforcement (2015-2021)

- Used for unsafe structures and appeals by owners who contest the violation
- Hear @ 90 cases with @ 178 hearings per year
- 57% of hearings are for unsafe structure
- Where demolition ordered: 63% homes demolished by city, 27% demolished by owner and 9% are rehabilitated



Key Observations About Property Maintenance

- Property Maintenance is a priority for city leaders
- Can not quantify challenge due to limited data
- Enforcement is a slow process that eats up substantial city resources
- Exterior condition is defacto city priority because tenants unlikely to complain due to fear of retaliation
- Treat all owners the same - Municipal Court Judge estimates 85% of owners who come before court are too old or too poor to repair violations

Preliminary Recommendations For Discussion

- Adopt 3 alternative code enforcement paths
 1. Financial and medical hardship
 2. Standard
 3. Large owners/chronic violators
- Provide protections to vulnerable tenants living in hazardous conditions
- Shorten enforcement timeframes – fewer continuances and reinspections



Preliminary Recommendations For Discussion

- Use public dollars for abatements strategically
- Broadly distribute user-friendly educational materials for owners and tenants
- Expand partnerships with county and NGO's
- Encourage private investors to reactivate vacant properties



Questions