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Mayor: Allentown reclaiming center city

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Allentown Mayor Ed Pawlowski says the city, armed with a new strategic housing plan, is finally on its way to reclaiming center city neighborhoods from years of blight and distress.

"Establishing a synergy between the business district and the neighborhoods is not an option, it is a necessity," Pawlowski said today as he summarized the findings of the strategy prepared by John Kromer of the Fels Institute of Government at the University of Pennsylvania. Kromer was housing director in Philadelphia when Gov. Ed Rendell was the city's mayor.

The report broadly recommends strengthening the city's defenses against exploitative investors, negligent and absentee owners and disruptive tenants, chiefly by enacting ordinances that demand accountability.

The first such ordinance will be introduced next week. If passed by city council, it will require pre-sale inspection of all residential properties. If code violations exist, they must be fixed prior to sale, or the new owner must notarize an acknowledgment of the problems and agree to fix them within 30 days or a period agreed to by a city inspector.

"The city does not currently require any inspection of properties prior to sale. As a result, we play catch-up with safety and maintenance problems after sales transactions have been completed," Pawlowski said.

Other suggestions include requiring out-of-county property owners to appoint an in-county rental agent who would be responsible for fixing code violations. The city should also create a fund to acquire properties in parts of the city targeted for redevelopment, the report says.

-- Reporting by Daniel Patrick Sheehan, *The Morning Call*

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