

OPINION

CONNECTICUT POST

EDITORIAL

Hardball on blight and taxes pays in Stratford

The town of Stratford is playing hardball with four eyesore properties that are not only long delinquent in tax payments but are unappetizing blemishes on the face of the community.

And that's how it should be.

Under the leadership of Mayor John Harkins, the town's relatively new Redevelopment Agency (RDA) - it was created in July 2012 - has rightly made an assault on blighted properties one of its top priorities.

Earlier this month the town made much of its plan to start razing a blighted old plating company building on Longbrook Avenue.

This particular property, the 10-acre former Contract Plating structure, is, like dozens in neighboring Bridgeport, in a high-visibility location, next to the Metro-North railroad tracks and directly behind a high-traffic shopping plaza with a Home Depot, ShopRite and Wal-Mart.

Harkins hit the nail on the head: "You have commuters riding by here every day and looking at a blighted structure.

Why this matters: Blight is one of the major problems facing faded

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Why this matters:

Blight is one of the major problems facing faded industrial communities. The town of Stratford is combining aggressive action on the blight and back tax fronts and is reaping benefit both financially and aesthetically.

Indeed, it's the face of Stratford to people passing through. They don't have the opportunity to see the town's many charms.

The work on Contract Plating is happening because the state Department of Economic and Community Development kicked in with a \$2.85 million grant. The aggressive action by the town on these properties

makes sense in so many ways. Eliminating the blight is an obvious benefit.

Clearing and cleaning land for new development - tax-paying development - is another.

But a side benefit has been the message it's sent to other property owners: In the two years before the RDA was created, the town collected only \$48,000 in back taxes. Since July 2012, it has collected \$347,000.

The message is out that the town's not fooling around on back taxes. And better to clear up the accounts now than find yourself at the wrong end of a foreclosure action.

The other three properties the town is focused on are the former Peasey Products site at 993 Honeyspot Road, an EPA superfund site at 576-600 East Broadway, and the unsightly Mercer Coal Towers at 2350 Stratford Avenue, not far over the Bridgeport line. Creation of the RDA has also helped streamline the convoluted, complicated process of foreclosure.

The independent actors in property management - town attorneys and other city officials working on brownfield redevelopment and those writing grant applications, for instance - now channel their work into a central clearinghouse. Stratford's decision to get tough on the owners of derelict properties is a lesson its neighbors should emulate.