



Robert Strupp of the Community Law Center is surrounded by homebuying signs that were posted illegally around Baltimore. Residents tore the signs down to turn them over to the city, but the city won't accept them. MONICA LOPOSSAY | SUN PHOTOGRAPHER

2 years after passage, city has no regulations

Sign law still toothless

BY JAMIE SMITH HOPKINS
(SUN REPORTER)

The "We Buy Houses" signs plastered illegally across the city drive Robert Strupp crazy.
It is not merely that they are ugly. Strupp, with the Community Law Center in Baltimore, sees them as neighborhood destabilizers that make it easier for real estate predators to find prey — but it is not just that, either.
No, it is that the city has yet to enforce a nearly two-year-old law allow-

ing citizens who tear them down to take them to city officials so the authorities can fine the sign owners. Regulations have not been put into place to make it possible.
"There's no teeth to it," said Strupp, director of research and policy at the nonprofit group, which has about 1,200 once-displayed signs piled up in its offices. "Nobody has been able to successfully take them anywhere."
The law, signed by then-Mayor Martin O'Malley in June 2006, directed residents to take signs posted on city-owned buildings, land, trees and the like to the Department of Public

Works. When the Community Law Center came bearing signs, however, it was told the department couldn't enforce that part of the law.
Regulations setting down the rules did not get past the draft stage, a city spokesman explained, and on top of that, the department's code enforcers were reassigned to the Department of Housing and Community Development last year. Follow-up legislation passed in December changed the drop-off site to the housing agency.
But regulations setting down the rules still have not been written. It is
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now up to the housing department.
"I'm confused by why they cannot — why they really won't — enforce it," said City Councilwoman Mary Pat Clarke, lead sponsor of the 2006 bill. "Citizens are empowered by law to remove the signs. The hitch is the bureaucracy's cooperation in accepting signs from the citizens and accepting their affidavits that the sign was illegally posted. And it's ridiculous.... There's an army out there that's being held back from the attack."
Sterling Clifford, a spokesman for the city, said draft regulations were circulated to community groups soon after the first law passed, "and then they kind of disappeared" when few offered feedback. He said the city needs input because the law states that any individual taking in a sign can name a nonprofit group to share in half the fine collected. Violators can be fined up to \$200 per sign.
"We need to restart that feedback process," he said.

Homeownership advocates do not like "We Buy Houses" signs because they believe, at best, that the come-ons encourage people with difficulties to sell for less than their homes are worth. At worst, the signs are a conduit for scammers.
The housing market decline and sharp increase in mortgage defaults have made many more homeowners vulnerable to sell quick offers than in 2006, when the bill was passed.
"They get suckered in," said Mary Warlow, marketing director at Belair-Edison Neighborhoods Inc., a nonprofit that offers housing counseling and other community services. "It can have a negative impact on the whole neighborhood."
It is unclear whether an owner of an illegally posted sign has ever had to pay, because a resident took evidence to the city. The police stepped in early and tracked some owners down, Clarke said, but the result might have been warnings rather than fines.
Alan Chantker, president of the Mid-Atlantic Real Estate Investors Association, said he has never

heard of anyone getting fined, whether citizen-initiated or not.
Chantker, who said his group warns investors that they are not supposed to post on public property, has not heard of someone getting a phone call. "And the phone number's right there," he added.
Even with numbers printed on the signs, Clifford said, tracking down the responsible parties and getting a citation into their hands is harder than it sounds. The 2006 law also gave citizens permission to throw the signs away, and he thinks that was what many residents wanted.
Cheron Porter, a spokesman for the housing department, said the city also responds to calls asking for sign removal. It received 58 of those requests last fiscal year.
She said the department is "actively trying to create a process that is just and expedient for all involved" on citizen-initiated fines.
"The most important thing is the signs are coming down," Porter said. "Now, worrying how you're going to get paid for it — I would hope that is less of a priori-

ty for everyone involved."
If it is true that the Community Law Center could benefit from fine-sharing — if there were fines — because it has been active in the push to get rid of "We Buy Houses" advertising. Some of the 1,200 signs in its collection were pulled down during a removal event it helped organize in 2006.
But Strupp said his objective is for violators to be held accountable — not just have their signs tossed. He noted that the Community Law Center has tracked down sign scofflaws and found that many have skirted the law in other ways, including improperly registering their limited liability companies.
"Strupp said he is at a loss to explain what regulatory feedback the city wants from the community. His nonprofit has been talking to officials for months about the topic, he said.
Clarke sees the delay as foot-dragging.
"This was not a favorite bill of the bureaucracy," she said. "It means work."
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