

# **Building and Planning Department** **2013 Annual Report**

## **I. Planning**

### **A. Planning Board**

The Planning Board acted on 29 requests for approvals. Most items included special use permits and minor subdivisions. The larger projects included 161 Masten Avenue and Delaware Avenue Apartments.

### **B. Zoning Board of Appeals**

The Zoning Board of Appeals considered and approved 16 variance requests. Of those, one use variance was approved for multi-family rental at 257 Columbia Street. Three use variance requests were denied. Most area variances concerned setbacks and lot size requirements.

### **C. Historic Preservation and Architectural Review Board**

The Historic Board reviews façade alterations and signage for buildings in the historic district. In 2013, the Historic Board considered seven applications and completed review of a drafted guidance document. Most of the applications addressed changes in siding, windows, front steps and signage for businesses.

### **D. Stormwater Management**

Several staff people handle stormwater duties. The City Engineer designs storm sewer (CSO) separation projects, reviews grading permits, sits on the Stormwater Coalition Working Group and Board of Directors, designs and oversees green infrastructure projects such as porous pavement parking lots and rain gardens, and prepares the annual report.

The Engineer Tech reviews, addresses and maintains files of SW inspection reports from open construction projects. She also organizes the stormwater files and books, attends training sessions, reviews all documentation for formulating responses and conducts site visits to ensure compliance. This past year she developed and conducted training for school-aged children regarding recycling and the water cycle.

The Director of Building and Planning sits on the Green Infrastructure Local Law Committee (GILLAC). This year that group developed a model local law for municipalities to adopt. The Long Term Control Plan requires the municipality to adopt green infrastructure (GI) code to encourage GI practices during (re)development.

### **E. Grant Writing**

The Building and Planning Director submitted a Linkage Study grant application proposing a feasibility study to CDTC. The Director is a voting member of the CDTC Planning Committee. The feasibility study would determine which methodology to use of implementing Smart Growth, sustainable growth, Complete Streets, and green infrastructure zoning code amendments. Partially to that end, the Department retained an intern from the Urban Planning Department of the University at Albany to map City properties in a statistical software program. The other purpose is to document locations that need extra attention from Code Enforcement. After the feasibility study the next step involves drafting new zoning code.

## **II. Building**

### **A. Code Enforcement**

## **1. MRIs**

In 2013 Code completed 578 MRI related inspections. Jack performed 388 of those; Tom 160; Melissa 20; John 19; and Ronnie 11.

## **2. ROPs**

The majority of the Code Officer's schedules are comprised of ROPs. Code logged a total of 1512 ROP inspections which include reinspections. Tom completed 803; Jack completed 308; John completed 339; Ronnie completed 55; and Melissa conducted 7 inspections on an as-needed basis. Payment prior to scheduling continues, and we continue to build a database of tenant names. The School District relies on our ROP records as does the Housing Authority.

## **3. Building Permits**

Ronnie, Barb and Garry reviewed and monitored several large projects: Water's View apartments, 31 Ontario Street, Admiral's Walk, City Lofts on Saratoga Street Apartments, 161 Masten Avenue, Harmony Mills 4 and 1, Stewarts (both at 94 and 480 Columbia Street) and Krug Place. We continue to review plans for Lexington Hills which has an anticipated construction start date in spring 2014.

In addition, 505 building permits were issued in 2013 (up from 422 in 2012). Eighteen of these building permits constituted new single or two family homes. One multi-family structure received a Certificate of Occupancy – the City Lofts on Saratoga Street. Sixty two roofs were updated or replaced. Code issued forty five window permits. Residents obtained permits to install twenty eight new fences and repair another twelve. Thirty permits were issued for alterations and another thirty six for miscellaneous work. The remaining building permits were for a variety of work. The most common included: siding, porches, dumpsters, demolition, deck installation and plumbing. However, we also reviewed items such as telecommunication facilities and solar panels.

Patty handles the building permit paperwork, including contractor's insurance. The Assessor continues to rely on plans from the building department to determine square footage and extent of rehabilitation on existing properties.

## **4. Vacant Building Registry**

Some of the court appearance tickets issued in 2013 concerned vacant buildings. The list contains roughly 100 properties at any given time. Many are in good shape and therefore do not warrant a court appearance ticket and the resulting application to the Vacant Building Registry. However, The Common Council will consider amending the code to permit ticketing of all vacant buildings.

We glean addresses from a zero usage reading provided by the Water Department as well as neighborhood complaints. Many of the properties on the zero usage list have either one vacant unit (with two water lines) or are owned by snowbirds. However, the remaining properties on the list are vacant with code violations or the water meter is broken. John Shea has begun monitoring all of the vacant buildings in the City. In addition the Choose Cohoes group has taken an interest in monitoring the vacant storefronts.

Of the 100 properties currently on the vacant building list, fifty paid the \$500 (or \$1000 or \$1500 depending on length of vacancy) annual fee. Many of these vacant properties are bank owned foreclosures. The City received over \$37,500 in

registration and annual fees for the properties currently on the VBR. Several properties previously listed in 2013 have since been resold or reoccupied.

Several problems hamper resolution: 1) the owner of record claims foreclosure while the bank claims to not have possession yet; 2) the previous owner dies intestate and no one owns the property yet the mortgage was satisfied and the taxes are paid; or 3) we cannot find the previous owner as there isn't a forwarding address. We continue to tighten up the process of pursuing vacant property owners. To that end, Code Enforcement began meeting monthly with Common Council representatives, the School District, Police Department and interested residents in order to formalize shared information.

## **5. Complaints**

Code Enforcement acted on 600 complaints in 2013. Of those 95 were grass complaints – always our highest number of complaints – and 69 were for renting without a permit. Another 45 were building exterior violations. The next highest complaint – 39 tenant complaints plus an additional 18 for overoccupancy – we receive from the school district. The next two – 33 for unsafe structures and 33 for yard debris plus 32 miscellaneous – code also pursued. The remainder came from neighbors, tenants, police, and fire personnel. Items range from working without a permit to unsafe or unhealthy living conditions.

In addition to those complaints listed in Municipality the Code Officers continue morning garbage duty. Their efforts resulted in approximately 290 garbage violations. Many property owners rectify the matter prior to DPW pick-up.

Code Enforcement assisted with unpaid opt-ins by placing stickers on the garbage cans, issuing violation notices which resulted in fines and coordinating removal of the cans from properties no longer paying for City pick-up. Twenty eight more properties eligible for the opt-in that have no discernable other means of waste removal haven't paid the fee.

## **6. Demolitions**

Due to County restrictions we did not perform any demolitions this year.

## **7. Fire and Police Department Routing Slips**

Code Enforcement reviews the daily Fire Department reports for potential code violations. The Police Department sends routing slips for code violations discovered during police calls. Code follows-up with the property owner to ensure compliance.

## **8. CSO Inspections**

Code Officers conducted biweekly CSO. Code Officers complete and save reports as well as notify DPW of any findings. Code officers also check for outfall signs. In lieu of a code officer the Engineer Tech performs the duty.

## **9. Tickets**

Patty handled 146 tickets in 2013. Many tickets resulted in fines as well as correction of the violations.

## **10. Boarding House Inspections**

Tom conducted the annual boarding house inspections at 14 Standish Place. Jack inspected 85-87 Mohawk Street. Melissa inspected 134 Remsen Street. All three sites failed inspection and are due for rehab. The owner of two Mohawk Street renovated two of the buildings and the third will be renovated for use as student housing.

### **11. Multi-family apartment complex inspections**

Jack conducts annual inspections of the fire suppression systems and common areas of large apartment complexes such as: Harmony Mills, Riverwalk, Columbia Gardens, and Water's View. Instead of MRI inspections we sometimes require the property managers to provide a list of the current tenants which we compare against our records to determine compliance with ROP requirements. The Department required such a list from Cayuga Plaza, Harmony Mills and Ogden Mills. Julie compared those submissions against department records to determine which units required updated ROPs.

### **12. Office Changes**

The Treasurer's Office scheduled ROPs and DPW assisted with payroll and covered the office when support staff needed time off. The Treasurer arranged the elementary school education opportunities for stormwater and recycling. Stormwater and Code issues education have also been posted in the quarterly newsletter.

Early in the year the Department hosted an intern who assessed department processes through interviews with everyone in City Hall. The Siena College intern recommended improving communication within the department as well as with other departments – inter and intradepartmental communication. As a result, staff brainstormed and implemented new processes to improve sharing of information.

## **III. Engineering**

Please see separate report.