

# Times Argus

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Article published Jun 24, 2010

## Lauzon eyes 'less-than-attractive' homeowners

By [David Delcore](#) TIMES ARGUS STAFF

BARRE – Increasingly frustrated with what he perceives as the city's inability to deal swiftly with property owners who let their buildings become less-than-attractive, Mayor Thomas Lauzon has called for the creation of yet another unbudgeted position.

Lauzon, who in recent weeks has supported the hiring of at least one unbudgeted police officer, a five-member bike patrol that is expected to hit the streets this week, and an animal control officer, said Tuesday that, judging from the results, Building Inspector Robbie Strachan clearly needs help.

"If it's a question of resources we need to provide them," said Lauzon, who anticipated City Manager John Craig's cringe and told him not to worry about another expense that he didn't take into account when crafting the voter-approved budget for the fiscal year that starts July 1.

"If we go over budget it's not your fault, it's mine," he said, predicting fines generated by the new position would cover the unanticipated cost.

Lauzon repeatedly stressed he isn't pointing fingers, but said he's not satisfied with the status quo.

"I just don't feel that we are making progress," he said, suggesting, in his view, that is unacceptable.

Councilor Paul Poirier wholeheartedly agreed.

"Our system doesn't work," he said.

Poirier recently toured the city with Lauzon, visiting a number of abandoned properties where trash has been piling up, neighbors have started to complain, but the problems have been allowed to persist.

Like Lauzon, Poirier said he believed there is a simple explanation.

"It's the lack of proper staffing," he said, echoing Lauzon's contention that Strachan is "spread too thin" with the city's inspection program making meaningful follow-up of complaints unnecessarily time-consuming.

Lauzon said he is convinced that additional manpower would aide the city in rigidly enforcing ordinances that are on the books and levying fines that will get the property owners' attention in short order.

"Our ordinances mean something, but if we're not enforcing them they mean jack," Lauzon said, noting that none of the abandoned properties he is aware of have registered with the city as required under its vacant buildings ordinance.

The simple failure to register vacant buildings exposes the owners to fines of \$150 a day for each continuing day of the violation.

According to Lauzon, those fines would add up quickly and – worst-case – could be converted into liens on the properties owned by people unwilling to bring them into compliance. However, he stressed, it's not about the money.

"It's not a revenue thing, it's a responsibility thing," he said.

Strachan said enforcing the city's vacant buildings ordinance isn't currently his responsibility and, to the best of his knowledge, the ordinance adopted by a council concerned about "curb appeal" last summer has never been enforced.

The city's apparent inability to swiftly impose its will on private property owners has been a lingering source of frustration, according to Lauzon, who said if it takes hauling a few of those folks into court, then so be it.

"I just want to hear a plan to get it done," he said, suggesting filling an unbudgeted position would be a good first step.

"Governing is about prioritizing and I'm setting this one," he said, giving Craig a week to report back with a plan.

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