

Community Impact: How Westmoreland County Redevelopment Authority & Land Bank are Helping Improve the Lives and Outcomes of County Residents

Nine and a half years ago, Carrie Hamley was a new homeowner envisioning her family making years of happy memories in their new house, excited to create a space her young children could call home. However, as the years passed and the house next door to Hamley's new home went from run-down to downright dangerous, her family found themselves feeling trapped.

The deteriorating house at 334 Harrison Avenue had long been vacant of human occupants, but in their place had moved families of rodents and swarms of pests. Fearing that the raccoons, groundhogs, and rats would carry rabies or other diseases, or that carpenter bees would cause injury to her small children, Hamley found that she could not safely allow her children to play in their own backyard without her being outside with them. The longer the house sat vacant, the more criminal elements it attracted: indigent people would use the buildings for housing; it was typical for drug users to be milling in and out of the property, leaving their dangerous paraphernalia behind. Soon, Hamley was unable to allow her children to play in the front of their house, as well.

In addition to the anxiety that comes with raising children with this element of blight next door, the family had to deal with disrepair from the vacant property causing damage to *their* property. Leaking gutters and running water washed out portions of the family's backyard landscaping, and caused structural issues with many of the family's backyard structures. Their home did not escape damage, either: a water spout from the blighted house's leaking gutter damaged the family's porch roof to the point of needing replacement.

The owner of the blighted building is a property management company. According to Hamley, the company's original intent was to create student housing, but was not cooperative in getting the house in compliance with the city's property maintenance codes. It was this lack of cooperation on the part of the property management company that caused the process of demolishing the blighted buildings to drag on for years, despite nearly the entire neighborhood being vocally united in their desire to see the property remediated. When the demolition finally occurred, "...it was like the entire neighborhood jumped for joy," Hamley laughed. "We were just so glad to finally see it gone. So much stress has been lifted from our home lives."

While the blighted buildings on the property are indeed gone now, the story is not over for Hamley. "The property management company still owns the plot of land," she explained. "We all are a little uneasy just because we don't know what their plans for it are. We'd like to see the lot repurposed for something the whole neighborhood can use and enjoy - maybe a community garden!"