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City ponders license for vacant homes, buildings

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LAKESWOOD — Landlords may soon have to register their unoccupied properties as City Council considers a vacant housing license.

The new procedure would require property owners to obtain a license for buildings or units they do not occupy, including apartment buildings, houses for rent or on the market and commercial structures.

“We’re trying to make sure that the owners of properties

not being maintained are held responsible,” said Mayor Ed FitzGerald. “One of the things we’ve seen in Lakewood, especially for bank-owned properties, is that vacant properties aren’t always being maintained to the degree we expect.”

According to FitzGerald, properties that remain vacant for a long time require a good deal of city resources to monitor for things like high grass, copper pipe thefts and break-ins.

“This particular license fee would really help the city re-

cover some of the costs we inevitably incur when a property remains vacant,” he said.

Council members have not yet determined the cost of the license.

According to a draft proposal, property owners who do not register with the city after a property is vacant for three months, could face the same penalties as those who fail to comply with other notices, such as a stop work order or a notice to repair.

Landlords would face a misdemeanor with fines of between \$25 and \$1,000 for the

first offense and a first degree misdemeanor for a second offense, which could lead to 180 days in jail and a \$5,000 fine. Each day without a license would be counted as a separate offense.

The license would also help the city keep track of a vacant property’s condition, as an inspection is required before a housing license is issued.

“We’re in what people have termed the Great Recession and that makes things harder for everybody,” said Ward 4 Councilwoman Mary Louise Madigan, who also chairs the council housing committee. “People don’t have the disposable income for improvements, but it doesn’t get them off the hook for basic repairs. Just because someone moves out of their house, it doesn’t mean that they don’t still have a responsibility to the city.”

FitzGerald said that the city will be addressing other issues concerning landlord responsibility later in the year, stating that it is one of the city’s “top priorities.”