

State program used to tear down abandoned house in Gifford

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GIFFORD — It took five tractor trailers full of debris and about six hours, but the abandoned house that once stood at 4431 27th Ave. is gone.

The home, built in 1940, was dismantled Wednesday through the state's Protocol for Assessing Community Excellence (PACE) program, which is coordinated by Julianne Price, a specialist with the Indian River County Environmental Health Division.

The homeowners, Flossie and Jack Tompkins, passed away, leaving the home to a daughter who could not afford to fix it. It sat in disrepair for years, serving as a haven for squatters, drug dealers and even stray cats, until the family qualified for assistance to remove it.

"That's the reason why so many of these homes are abandoned," said Price. "These people are deceased and families just can't afford to fix them."

It's the 10th house dismantled through the PACE program since last April, including homes in Wabasso and Fellsmere, as well as Gifford. Four more homes in Gifford are scheduled for demolition as soon as funds are available, she said.

Sandra Woolfork Jackson watched from across the street as a large excavator dismantled the house where she had played as a child. Jackson, who lives in Miami, was in Gifford visiting her mother Cora, and had mixed feelings about the demolition.

"I remember playing over there and Miss Flossie and Mr. Jack would be watching out, making sure we were safe," said Jackson. "It's sad because there are very few original families left on this street, but that house had to go. You would see people coming in and out of it and it certainly wasn't safe."

Contractor Henry Fischer and Sons of Sebastian volunteered to demolish the house and provided the manpower and equipment at no charge. The County Commission covered the disposal fees at the landfill, which came to approximately \$2,700, Fischer's demolition supervisor, Pat Price, said. He is no relation to Julianne Price.

Solid Waste Disposal District Director Himanshu Mehta watched as the contractor carted about 80 tons of debris to the landfill off Oslo Road.

“The landfill can’t waive the fees so we went to the County Commission and they approved a general fund contingency to pay for the cost,” said Mehta. “It’s similar to what happens when we have an illegal dumping site; we use the same funding mechanism to pay for that.”

A recent survey of Gifford residents showed that 76.5 percent identified deserted buildings and cars as a top community issue. Another 43 percent thought building nicer houses instead of more low-income housing would be the best way to neighborhood improvement. The survey was done by the PACE group.

“They want to bring back this community,” Julianne Price said.