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Bernalillo County assessor increases downtown property values

Updated: 6:36 PM MDT Aug 15, 2023

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T.J. Wilham

Investigative Producer

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — Despite its best efforts, the city of Albuquerque still has vacancies downtown, an area the city has tried to revitalize for years.

Target 7 has now discovered a strategy one newly elected official is trying in those efforts. That official is Bernalillo County Assessor Damian Lara, whose plan focuses on increasing the assessed value of abandoned buildings.

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"Looking at them through the best and highest use," Lara said. "We increased valuations of properties across Bernalillo County, but most of them in the downtown area."

Lara determines those property valuations, and if a property is valued higher, more tax money can be generated based on that assessed value. Some say the new assessor is overstepping.

Target 7 found through tax records that property owners of many downtown vacant buildings are facing as much as a 9% hike in price. One newspaper property was valued at \$197,000 in 2017; that property is now covered in graffiti and valued at \$215,000.

A restaurant with similar conditions went up \$20,000 during that same time period. Lara said the plan caused the owners to take action.

"It provides an incentive for the property owner to rehabilitate that property," Lara said. "Make it an income-producing property, or to sell it to somebody else who's going to start a new business there."

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Resident Doug Peterson is a local property owner and said an owner like himself should have choices.

"It is tough because when someone has a property, they should generally be able to do with it what they want," Peterson said. "And one of those things might be doing nothing with it."

"I respectfully think it might be out of the assessor's wheelhouse to get into increasing values on properties because they're vacant," Peterson said.

Paul Gessing with the Rio Grande Foundation, a taxpayer watch group said this strategy is a first for him.

"That's all well and good if it works," Gessing said. "But there's a lot of potential problems with the strategy and there's also questions of fairness."

Lara said he is doing his part in cleaning up downtown and has the authority to do so.

"I don't steer the ship," Lara said. "But I can decide how much coal and how fast to put into that sort of burner to make that steamship move in the direction that the governor and the state

legislature wants us to move in."

Target 7 also looked into downtown properties with tenants and found many are also facing a 9% increase in property valuation.

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'Our grief is indescribable': These are some of the lives lost after wildfires devastated Maui

Updated: 12:09 AM MDT Aug 16, 2023

By PAT EATON-ROBB and BEATRICE DUPUY, Associated Press

MAUI COUNTY, Hawaii — **Wildfires** have devastated parts of Maui in Hawaii, leaving a trail of destruction and devastation, decimating a historic town.

Video above: Governor of Hawaii orders review of Maui wildfires emergency response

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While many wait in agony for news on whether their friends and family are safe, the fires have already claimed the lives of at least 106 people— making it the deadliest U.S. wildfire in more

than 100 years. Here are the stories of those who died.

Dreaming of retirement

All Donna Hartley could think of as TV footage showed fires engulfing the town of Lahaina was her sister. But Carole Hartley wasn't picking up her phone.

“I told my husband that if this is burned like this then Carole’s house is gone,” the 62-year-old said.

Two days later, her sister's partner called, and the news wasn't good. He told her that he had been in the front yard loading his car and Carole Hartley had been in the backyard, possibly checking on a tenant, when the wind fanned the flames. The car exploded.

After Carole’s partner assembled a team of friends for a search party, Donna Hartley heard the news Saturday night that he had found her sister’s remains, including her watch. She is still waiting for official DNA verification for her free-spirited little sister, who had lived in Lahaina for 36 years.

“Her birthday was Aug. 28, and she was going to be 61 years old,” Donna Hartley said. “She kept telling me as of late ,,, one more year sister, and I’m retiring.” Donna Hartley said her friends at home in Grand Bay, Alabama, plan on holding a memorial for Carole.

Video above: Fires wreak havoc on historic town of Lahaina

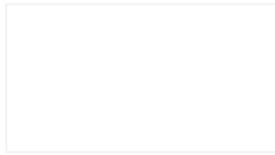
A family's loss

A family of four — Faaso and Malui Fonua Tone, Salote Takafua, and her son, Tony Takafua — died while attempting to flee from the flames. Their remains were found Thursday in a burned car near their home.

“The magnitude of our grief is indescribable,” read a statement from family members.

Lylas Kanemoto, who knew the Tone family, confirmed the devastating news Sunday.

“At least we have closure for them, but the loss and heartbreak is unbearable for many. We as a community has to just embrace each other and support our families, friends, and our community to our best of our abilities,” Kanemoto told The Associated Press by text message on Sunday.



Wildfires in Maui are among the deadliest in US history. These are the other fires atop the list

Kanemoto is still awaiting news on her cousin, Glen Yoshino, who is missing.

“I’m afraid he is gone because we have not heard from him and he would’ve found a way to contact family,” Kanemoto said. “We are hoping for the best, but preparing for the worst.”

—

'A really good man'

Retired fire captain Geoff Bogar and his friend of 35 years, Franklin Trejos, initially stayed behind to help others in Lahaina and save Bogar’s house. But as the flames moved closer and closer Tuesday afternoon, they knew they had to flee.

Each escaped to his own car. When Bogar’s vehicle wouldn’t start, he broke through a window to get out and crawled on the ground until a police patrol found him, and he was taken to a hospital.

Trejos didn't escape.

When Bogar returned the next day, he found the bones of his 68-year-old friend in the back seat of his car, lying on top of the remains of the Bogars' beloved 3-year-old golden retriever Sam, whom he had tried to protect.

Trejos, a native of Costa Rica, had lived for years with Bogar and his wife, Shannon Weber-Bogar, helping her with her seizures when her husband couldn't. He filled their lives with love and laughter.

"God took a really good man," Weber-Bogar said.

Video: FEMA tours Lahaina, Hawaii, following wildfires

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