

## Conversations with Robert featuring Rich Monocchio

Part of our mission at Community Blight Solutions is to facilitate conversations across the industry. This open communication among stakeholders will help us better understand the challenges of community blight and address them in a holistic way.

I recently sat down with Rich Monocchio, Executive Director, Housing Authority of Cook County in Chicago, to hear his take on community blight, clearboarding and how this new technology can help address some major issues within the industry.

### **Q: What are the benefits of using polycarbonate clearboarding instead of plywood boarding to secure vacant property?**

**A:** To me, there are two huge and critical advantages to clearboarding versus plywood. The first is the safety issue for first responders. I myself have gone into many abandoned buildings that have been secured by plywood, and I didn't know what was on the other side. The advantage, obviously, of clearboarding is you have an immediate idea of what you're getting into. So safety comes to mind as a huge benefit.

Second, and just as important, it has a positive impact on the neighborhood itself. Right now if you drive through neighborhoods that have several, dozens or even hundreds of buildings with plywood, it immediately gives a negative impression of that neighborhood or block. It would not lead someone to say, "This is some place that I think I would want to invest."

With clearboarding, the building is much more secure than plywood, but you also have an aesthetic benefit. Clearboarding doesn't give that immediate impression, like plywood, that this neighborhood is in a downward spiral, and is not a place where we would either want to live or invest.

### **Q: You kind of touched on this in your second point, but how does the use of clearboarding help solve the problem of neighborhood community blight?**

**A:** I think using clearboarding is important to the neighbors. If you're living next to a vacant building, or have a vacant building on each side of you, you feel unsafe. The boards may have been torn down and people are going in and out of the building, so it's also a safety issue for the people that live on the block and the kids that walk down the street.

It's not *just* the first responders or code officials, it's people that actually live there. We all know that these buildings become attractive nuisances and all sorts of things can happen in them, and all sorts of things do happen to them. So you're helping to keep that neighborhood stable, at least until you can either rebuild or rehabilitate. With plywood, you just start a downward spiral.

**Q: What are some of the issues that need to be addressed or obstacles to overcome in replacing plywood boarding with polycarbonate clearboarding?**

**A:** I think that first we have to get the lenders, REO community and the GSEs – Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac – exposed to the product, because at the end of the day, it's protecting their investment. Cost is always an issue, and as someone that used to spend a ton of money either boarding or tearing down buildings, I can tell you that not many cities are able to do that. In Chicago, we were able to board up a property or tear it down because we put a priority on it. So I think that cost issue has to be addressed, and I know it's being worked on now, and there was a recent breakthrough with Fannie Mae reimbursing servicers for alternatives for plywood. That's a huge first step.

It's also getting to talk to local officials and show them that in terms of cost, it's really a cost saving at the end of the day because you're only going to have to use this product once. You're not going to have multiple reboards. And the community benefits far outweigh what might be a little bit more upfront expense for clearboarding. That expense is outweighed by the fact that you won't have to redo it several times, and by the fact that you're keeping communities much more stable while they go through this transformation.

**Q: How will the recent Fannie Mae decision to reimburse mortgage servicers for their use of polycarbonate boarding on pre-foreclosure properties impact the industry?**

**A:** I think it's huge. When you have pre-foreclosures in the first place, it's not something that anyone really wants on their books. So to help take away any additional cost to securing those assets in the pre-foreclosure stage, I think it is a game changer for that product.

Also, there's now a government acknowledgement that this actually works, and there's a good reason why you should use a product that keep neighborhoods and first responders safe rather than the older cheap way that doesn't work.

**Q: How will the Fannie Mae decision impact the Cook County community?**

**A:** We own developments all over southern Cook County, and I see a lot of vacant and abandoned buildings adjacent to our properties. So I think once this product becomes standardized, it's going to make a huge difference – especially in the lives of lower-income people.