

DeKalb image to get literal clean-up

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By [April Hunt](#) - The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Bit by bit, DeKalb County is trying to improve the way it looks.

Hundreds of boarded-up homes, remnants of the housing crisis, mar the landscape of the state's third-largest county. Add to that DeKalb's other recent problems: corruption allegations in county government that makes DeKalb appear lawless; school board dysfunction that makes the county appear leaderless.



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David Bautista installs a polycarbonate material over a window in an empty house on Monday, October 4, 2013.

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Interim DeKalb CEO Lee May sees each of these problems in the same light — image concerns that he and other DeKalb leaders must fix.

For the foreclosed and abandoned homes, May thinks the county has a solution. DeKalb wants to ditch the wooden boards that cover windows and signal to criminals and vagrants a home is vacant. It wants to require clear coverings for windows that will help those houses blend better in neighborhoods struggling with foreclosure.

“As we are moving forward in DeKalb, it's key we have a commitment to being open,” May said. “We want a beautiful county, in every sense, that we can be proud of.”



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David Bautista installs a polycarbonate material over a window in an empty house on Monday, October 4, 2013. DeKalb is using the material as an alternative board-up system on empty house because it is designed to look like traditional windows. This material makes it easy for police officers to see inside of empty houses.

Like other metro Atlanta counties, DeKalb has struggled with a high rate of foreclosures and plunging tax revenue since the economic downturn.

In other ways, too, 2013 has proven to be especially battering to DeKalb, starting with Gov. Nathan Deal removing the majority of the school board in February, over threats to district accreditation.

The June indictment of suspended CEO Burrell Ellis on political corruption charges, and the August release of a scathing grand jury report that said the county was ripe for misdeeds, further eroded both public trust and DeKalb's image.



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Interim DeKalb County CEO Lee May hits the polycarbonate material with a baseball bat to show how strong it is on Monday, October 4, 2013. DeKalb is using the material as an alternative board-up system because it is designed to look like traditional windows.

May recently announced a renewed focus on physically cleaning up the county – through code enforcement blitzes, new landscaping and litter cleanups.

The clean-up work could prove a win to residents eager for change.

“We need to deal with these issues,” said Kathryn Rice, a community activist and founder of the new South DeKalb Improvement Association. “I don’t think our in-depth issues will be fixed by changing the appearance of a neighborhood. But work it on it, bit by bit, it will improve.”

The move to replace plywood with a see-through plastic — a polycarbonate covering that’s hard to shatter — is more than just looks, however. Alexander said residents and police officers alike will benefit by being able to see into the vacant homes.

Right now, squatters and criminals can easily use those properties as their own.

That’s what’s happening in his Decatur-area subdivision, said Winston Callue. Never mind that most homes, including his, had the brick-front curb appeal of traditional suburbia, he said.

“This was always a good neighborhood, but it just takes one house to go down to see a decline,” Callue said. “Even if it just looks nicer, that’s something for getting back on track.”

Howard Wedren, the president of SecureView, which makes the polycarbonate covering, likes to think the better look has helped with rebounding prices in places like Chicago, where it’s been on the market.

DeKalb is the first county in Georgia to try out the product. Wedren was unfamiliar with the county’s political struggles but understands the impulse to improve.

“There is a bigger cost to communities if they have an image problem,” he said. “You want your neighborhood to look good. You want to feel good about where you live.”

At the same time, DeKalb is launching vacant home registry, requiring owners to list properties so officers can keep tabs on them, said code director Marcus Kellum.

“We have an opportunity here to be a better county and that’s something I am promoting every day,” he said.