

JUNE 19, 2006

City receives grant to help cleanup unsightly properties

By **DONNA HILTON**
Siftings Herald

Dilapidated buildings and structures may soon be a thing of the past in Arkadelphia, thanks to a grant from Southern Bancorp. Arkadelphia's Board of Directors is expected to discuss a list of properties in need of attention during its meeting Thursday night.

If approved, the \$50,000 grant will be used as seed money to clean up unsightly properties.

City Manager Jimmy Bolt said the city already has an ordinance which allows for the demolition of neglected property. "Our process is relatively simple," Bolt said. "We only lacked the funding."

After the property is cleared, the city can file a lien on it to recoup the cleanup costs from the property owner. "Hopefully, we'll get some

(properties) done and the funds will start coming back to us." Bolt said. If successful, the grant will allow the city to start a process that will eventually sustain itself, Bolt said.

The idea of the project came through a survey done by the Clark County Strategic Development Plan, said Phil Baldwin, president of Southern Bancorp. "The key idea was to clean up the town," Baldwin said. It was the number one response on a survey of the needs of the county.

Abandoned buildings in disrepair lower the value of property and neighborhoods, both financially and emotionally, Baldwin said. "It's not pleasant to live next to abandoned houses."

Southern Bancorp is "committed

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to the planning process," said Paul Shuffield, community development officer of the corporation. "We're really excited about the partnership" between the firm and the city.

"We don't want to have to wait until the (Strategic Development) plan is written to start making a difference," Baldwin said.

A list of target properties in the city of Arkadelphia has been identified, said Don Clark, code enforcement officer for the city.

"It's more like a search and rescue project," Clark said. Once the properties are identified, the owners are contacted. The owners can choose to clean up the properties themselves, or owe the city for the cost of demolition and debris removal.

Most of the properties chosen for the list belong to non-Arkadelphia residents, Clark said. "We only have a few who live here."

The goal of the process is not only to get the properties cleaned up, Bolt said, but to make the property part of a thriving community. "We want to get the property back into the hands of owners who want to develop it and make it

attractive."

Successful residents of attractive communities are the goal for Southern Bancorp as well, Baldwin said. "It's just a matter of living up to our potential."

Dr. Alan Wright, co-chairman of the Clark County Strategic Development Plan, said the cleanup will be the first visible action in implementing wanted change.

"This action by Southern Bancorp and the city of Arkadelphia is a signal that the people, the institutions, and the governments are ready for action.

"Everyone wants to get together to improve the overall environment in the city and the county. This is a good first step; the people's input from the first Clark County Strategic Planning meeting has been heard and acted upon," Wright said.

If approved by the city board, the money should be available for use by early July, Baldwin said. The grant is also eligible for renewal, he said. "When they use the first \$50,000, they can apply for more."

Arkadelphia's Board of Directors will meet at 7 p.m. Thursday in the boardroom of Town Hall.