

Around LI

Police get new tactical vehicle

The East Hampton Town Board has accepted an armored tactical response vehicle from an anonymous donor for use by the town police department during emergencies and other events.

The \$307,000 BearCat will be used by the Emergency Service Unit to deploy to dangerous situations, according to town resolutions on the matter.

The donor met with town Police Chief Michael Sarlo and the chiefs of the Sag Harbor and East Hampton village police departments earlier this year and decided the armored vehicle would be the best gift to protect the town's citizens, Sarlo said. It will allow the department to get near an armed assailant and can also act as an ambulance, he added.

"We have presidents, presidential candidates, federal judges, heads of state, movie stars, sports stars, business titans [visiting the town]," Sarlo said during a May 7 town board work session. "These people frequent our area and would be prime, high-profile victims for an attack."

— VERA CHINESE

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SMITHTOWN TOWN

TRACKING zombie homes

Town works to finish database of hundreds of homes in financial distress

BY NICHOLAS SPANGLER
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Smithtown Public Safety officials this summer will finish a massive database of residential properties used to identify, track and fix those close to or trapped in foreclosure, commonly known as zombie homes.

Ordinance enforcement officer Catherine Caillat and a team of Smithtown Town and temporary investigators hired for the project identified 249 vacant homes with mortgages in arrears and another 1,069 in pre-foreclosure, with two or more consecutive missed payments. They found 745 properties in tax arrears totaling \$8,651,020. By late May, the team had inspected 36,464 of the town's 40,855 one- to four-home residential properties.

Officials said they found concentrations of problem properties in the hamlets of Smithtown and Nesconset, though the overall numbers are small compared with foreclosure hot spots upstate and on Long Island's Sandy-hit South Shore.

The goal, they said, is a nimble government able to address problem homes long before they need to be demolished, a step some other Long Island governments have taken.

"We were always complaint-driven," Caillat said. Now, "We're becoming data-driven, so we can anticipate if there is an area that we need to focus our attention on."

Officials began to notice higher numbers of vacant houses in 2010, as the 2008 financial crisis rippled on. "There were more initially because there were predatory lenders and interest rates were so high," Caillat said. Identifying the homes wasn't always easy — well-meaning neighbors often mowed lawns and picked up mail — but they



NEWSDAY / STEVE PROST

Town public safety inspector Karen Sylvester visits a vacant home on New York Avenue in Smithtown.

learned to look for clues, such as tall grass and windows bare of curtains or blinds. Investigators made so many trips to search deeds at the Suffolk County clerk's office in Riverhead that the task got a name, said town investigator Karen Sylvester: the Riverhead Run.

The database, built over the past year with \$610,000 in New York State grants, makes property ownership records available instantly to town departments, villages and fire departments, along with contact information for banks and servicers.

To augment those records, investigators compare notes with colleagues from other departments and officials from local water districts, since service cutoffs are often an early sign of vacancy.

Once investigators have identified a property as at risk, they try to visit the homeowner to provide counseling. In some

State foreclosure tips

The state offers tips for homeowners facing foreclosure:

- Contact your lender or servicer immediately.
- Contact a not-for-profit housing counselor. Reach an alliance of HUD-approved counseling agents, servicers, investors and mortgage lenders that provide free foreclosure prevention assistance at 888-995-4673.
- Seek legal assistance.

SOURCE: NYS DEPARTMENT OF FINANCIAL SERVICES

cases, grants are available to help mortgage payments, or the bank will renegotiate the terms of the mortgage loan.

"We've been aggressive," Public Safety Chief John Valentine said, but "we're not going out there with bulldozers . . . You

don't want those families displaced."

For properties that are already vacant, investigators contact the banks to ensure structures are secured and maintained, armed with a 2016 New York State zombie house measure that requires banks to do the work.

So far, 33 Smithtown homes have been rehabilitated and resold, but the town has 319 legal actions pending to force banks to do property maintenance. Investigators have had difficulty reaching some banks that Caillat said are playing a "shell game" with frequently traded deeds and changing phone numbers and emails.

Sylvester, touring a recently identified zombie house on New York Avenue in Smithtown, surveyed the backyard: rotted deck, abandoned grill and desolate kiddie pool. "This was someone's life," she said. "When something like this happens, it's sad."