

Vocal landlord critic owns decaying lots - Her homes cited for violations, lots filled with trash and weeds

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Author: The Detroit News ; David Josar

DETROIT -- Sharquita Craig shrugs in despair as she looks next door at the low-slung, boarded-up house that City Councilwoman Martha Reeves has owned since 1998.

No one has rented the St. Aubin Street house for months, said Craig, the mother of two toddlers. The grass is thigh-high and bags of trash litter the yard.

"At least those dope dealers are gone who used to be there," she said. "You would think once Martha got on City Council she'd do something with it. It's still a mess."

Reeves, 64, a Motown legend elected to the council in November, has spoken repeatedly about the need for the city to crack down on property owners and illegal dumpers who contribute to Detroit's decay. But a Detroit News review of city, county and court records shows that Reeves, who **owns 15 lots** and three rental properties in a two-square-mile area near Hamtramck, doesn't always practice what she preaches.

According to documents and interviews:

Y The city has been forced, at taxpayers' expense, to raze at least one of Reeves' houses after inspectors grew weary of trying to get the derelict building up to code. While no records pinpoint the demolition cost, city officials say the tab for an average-size home is about \$5,000. The singer said there were squatters in the building, the structure later burned and the city tore it down. She said she has never been given a bill by the city, but is reviewing her records to see if there have been any demands for payment.

Y None of Reeves' homes has been given approval by city inspectors as being safe to be rented, nor have permits been requested for repairs. Inspectors found 25 code violations at a two-unit rental, include two emergency infractions for the failure to maintain fire doors. Those problems have never been corrected.

Y Ten of Reeves' 15 vacant **lots** are covered in deep weeds, grass and overgrown trees. Three have become dumping grounds for old stereos, clothing, furniture, construction debris and other trash. City inspectors have cited other landowners for similar problems, but because of the number of vacant **lots** in the city, not every violator has been ticketed. In a written response to questions submitted to her by The News, Reeves said she acquired most of the properties "sight unseen" at a state land auction.

"My hope was to help revitalize some of the neighborhoods in Detroit, by building on them, or working with community groups to establish urban greenery areas," she said.

Reeves added she recently hired a new management company to watch over her properties.

"...Improvements are forthcoming," she said.

Reeves, whose property taxes are current, said the red tape and difficulty working with the city to fix the properties was "absolutely unbelievable."

"I believe that regardless of celebrity, or status in the community, all property owners should be held accountable," she said.

"I believe that the citizens have a right to hold their elected officials' feet to the fire. I am working hard to make the necessary improvements to these properties, whether vacant **lots**, or houses, and will continue to work towards the improvements of the areas. Improvements will occur, as they are economically feasible for me to complete."

The only other City Council member who **owns** property besides the homes in which they live is Monica Conyers, according to a review of Wayne County Register of Deeds and city of Detroit tax records.

Conyers, wife of U.S. Rep. John Conyers, lives in a \$340,000 home near the Detroit Golf Course and **owns** a rental home in the 3300 block of Charlevoix, on the city's east side. The rental property has been vacant for more than a year, neighbors said, and the screens over some windows are torn. But the grass is cut and there are piles of renovation materials inside.

Areas 'too out of control'

Martha Reeves is known to generations of popular music buffs for the golden days of Motown.

Under the tutelage of Motown founder Berry Gordy Jr., the Alabama-born Reeves became lead singer of Martha Reeves and the Vandellas, whose 12 Top 40 hits include "Dancing in the Street," "Heat Wave" and "Nowhere to Run." In 1994, she and the Vandellas were inducted into the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame.

Reeves, who lives in a 12th floor apartment in the luxury high rise 1300 Lafayette East, said she decided to run for City Council last year in part because not enough was being done to promote Detroit's musical heritage.

And as a Detroit **landlord**, Reeves claimed, she could bring to the council her firsthand experience dealing with the city's bureaucratic red tape.

While campaigning, she said she was unable to rehab some of her properties because the neighborhoods were too out of control.

"Junkies and crack heads have been taking down boards and even held some of the workmen at gunpoint until they ran away," she said in a Billboard magazine interview. "The policing needs to be there and it needs to be visible."

She told The News she "personally encountered a man with a gun" while surveying her properties.

That concern strikes some living near her properties as disingenuous. They're miffed that her unkempt properties are dragging down their neighborhoods. Some have shouldered responsibility for their upkeep.

"You do what you can to keep things nice, but we shouldn't be the ones cutting her grass," said Barbara Scott, a retired nurse who rents a home in the 13100 block of McDougall. The councilwoman's **lot**, across the street from Scott's home, was blanketed by deep grass.

Reeves purchased the property, and 16 other parcels, from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources on Feb. 3, 1998, for \$3,220. That same day, for \$8,500, she bought a state parcel in the 17500 block of Dequindre, but sold it three months later to a Detroit woman for \$1.

According to city records, the Detroit Department of Public Works hired AAA Wrecking and Demolition to knock down a wood-frame house on her McDougall property, and haul away the debris, in September 1999.

Last summer, tired of looking at the overgrown property, Scott said she flagged down some landscapers who were mowing grass on a nearby city-owned **lot**.

"They said they couldn't cut on private property," Scott recalled. "They then looked at each other and said 'Sure,' but that they'd have to do it on their lunch hour. They did."

Less than a half-mile away, in the 13400 block of Moran, Robert Reiz has a beef with the condition of one of Reeves' properties there.

He gestured toward the broken TV, splintered wardrobe, two discarded tires and five plastic bags filled with rotting trash that spilled across the sidewalk.

"There could be rats in there. Maybe even snakes," said Reiz, 32, as he walked his pit bull puppy. "That's too much of a risk for my dog."

Units never registered

None of Reeves' homes, including two that currently have tenants, has ever been registered with the Building and Safety Engineering Department as a rental unit, even after she was ordered to do so in a correction order by Inspector James Rhodes on May 17, 2004 and again on Feb. 20, 2006 for the home at 12391 Evanston.

Rhodes was most alarmed by the lack of a fire door at the address, but he also found no smoke detectors, defective electrical receptacles and unapproved wiring.

The city is using its new Department of Administrative Hearings to cite **landlords** who fail to comply with correction orders, but no tickets had been issued to the city councilwoman.

Reeves also was given a correction order for 13532 St. Aubin in 2005 because it was open to trespassing, had broken windows and peeling paint, and an unlicensed vehicle, debris and high weeds in the yard. She has never responded to the correction order.

Her third rental property, at 2409 Townsend, has never been inspected, according to city records.

Reeves sued

With its asphalt brick facade, the house at 17350 Gallagher, just north of McNichols and west of I-75, is tidy -- now. But city officials say it has never been inspected as the city ordinance requires before it can be occupied, and documents show it had fallen into serious disrepair under Reeves' ownership.

On June 21, 2002, more than four years after Reeves bought 17350 Gallagher from the state, attorneys representing the city of Detroit and Wayne County sued Reeves, saying the house was a danger to residents and was destroying the quality of life in the city.

A judge signed an order barring her from selling the property until the case was resolved.

A digital photograph in the court file shows the vacant house was open to trespassers, and had a collapsing porch, broken windows and missing shingles.

Although Reeves had signed for the court papers sent to her home, she failed to show in court.

Eventually, after two years of legal wrangling, Reeves and the building co-owner, Glyn M. Styles, also of Detroit, improved the property enough to convince the city and county to drop the lawsuit.

The case was dismissed by the city on Oct. 10, 2004, and on Nov. 22, 2004, Reeves sold her interest to Styles for \$2,500. The house is now a rental unit.

'It could be worse'

Carpenter Lawrence Haywood, 43, remembers the day several years ago when Reeves came through his neighborhood in the 5500 block of Dubois, where a handful of well-kept homes are outnumbered by abandoned buildings and vacant **lots** .

Haywood was painting the railing of the rooming house he **owns** and calls home. He knew Reeves owned the vacant **lot** across his street and once day was surprised to see the singer touring the neighborhood.

"I guess she was looking at what was available to buy and do here," said Haywood, whose boarding house is across from a vacant **lot** that Reeves already owned. "I don't think she was interested in buying my place."

Haywood said he thinks a crew comes by every few weeks to make sure the grass and weeds don't get too high.

"I guess she's doing what she can do," he said. "It could be worse."

The Reeves record Where she lives

The Detroit City Council member and Motown legend lives in a luxury high-rise on Lafayette.

What she **owns**

Reeves **owns** 18 properties in Detroit: 15 are vacant **lots** , two are rented and one is vacant.

What she says

"I believe that regardless of celebrity or status in the community all property owners should be held accountable."

What the neighbors say

"You do what you can to keep things nice, but we shouldn't be the ones cutting her grass," says Barbara Scott, with her fiance, Richard Fabiszak.

Reeves' properties

2224 Farnsworth

Vacant **lot** with neatly cut grass

13451 Moran

A vacant **lot** that has become magnet for illegal dumpers. Last week the site was covered with furniture, bags of trash, discarded electronic equipment and bags of trash.

2744 Anglin

A vacant **lot** next to an abandoned house. Plot is uncut grass and dirt.

13151 McDougall

Vacant **lot** covered in thigh-high grass. Neighbors have had to ask city workers to mow grass. When Reeves acquired it in 1998, a house had stood. The city Department of Public Works demolished it in 1999.

14244 Maine

High grass covers this **lot** . Neighbor cuts small swath into Reeves **lot** along the border of his property. 12391 Evanston

Two-unit apartment building Reeves bought in 2001 for \$59,500. Never registered with city and has open safety violations.

1949 Dearing

The **lot** has been vacant since before Reeves bought it. Neighbors say they are forced to cut the grass and are worried about what will happen now since the man who had done the mowing was murdered in a drive-by shooting in May.

2127 Cody

Pile of old tree stumps sits on this vacant **lot** that Reeves acquired in 1998. This **lot** is in the middle of several other **lots** that together resemble an urban prairie.

2303 Carpenter

Status unknown.

5536 Dubois

A vacant **lot** in a rundown neighborhood filled with overgrown **lots** , boarding houses and abandoned homes. Area residents use the **lot** as part of their horseshoe pit.

2401 Townsend

Vacant **lot** that is part of adjacent rental home.

2409 Townsend

Rental, never registered with city

624 Alameda

This is a vacant **lot** so tiny city code prohibits any type of construction on the site. It is cared for by neighbors.

13532 St. Aubin

Rundown home is boarded up but boards are loose in back and garbage dots the property. Neighbors say drug dealers had lived there at one time.

13568 Mackay

Broken storm windows, Styrofoam insulation and trash are scattered across the overgrown **lot** that is half-surrounded with a leaning-over chain-link fence. Trees and weeds on the property cover up parts of the adjoining sidewalk.

18064 Mackay

A neatly cut lawn stands next to a vacant shack owned by a bank. 13934 Goddard

Waist-high weeds, a broken toilet and smashed TV cover this **lot** . 13874 Lumpkin

Vacant **lot** covered with high grass and trash, including two chairs, a TV set and tires.
Caption: SITTING EMPTY: Garbage dots the property at this boarded-up home on St. Aubin.
DUMPING GROUND: Splintered furniture, discarded electronic equipment and rotting trash litter this vacant **lot** at 13451 Moran, one of the 15 **lots** and three rental properties owned by Detroit City Councilwoman Martha Reeves.

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