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Protesters hit sheriff's foreclosure auctions

NCCo no longer sells homes for delinquent taxes

Amanda Lance held Stephen Thatcher's left arm as the pair waited for their Newark-area home to be auctioned off Tuesday at a New Castle County sheriff's sale.

The couple -- Lance teary-eyed, her fiance somberly still -- sat listening as other foreclosed properties were sold to the highest bidder. The two said they felt helpless but were determined to witness their home's auctioning. They were surprised, however, to hear Occupy Delaware protesters get up and demand that the foreclosure sales cease.

Lance cried as protesters walked by her, passing out Valentine's cards with messages "Don't Go Breaking My Heart" on the front and state foreclosure statistics on the back.

"It was just so sweet because they weren't even losing their house, and they were sticking up for us," she said.

As it has done since November, Occupy Delaware continued its practice of disrupting the sheriff's sales, if only momentarily. The foreclosure crisis is a main issue for Occupy Delaware, which is made up of local supporters of the Occupy Wall Street movement.

"We continue this, and we will be here every month because of the travesty of what is going on with the mortgage crisis in this country and our state," said Occupy protester Bernard August.

In the end, Lance's home was not offered for sale Tuesday, but she wasn't immediately able to find out why.

August said the protests are bringing attention to the problem.

New Castle County Executive Paul Clark last week halted sheriff's sales of properties delinquent in county property taxes. Sheriff Trinidad Navarro said the move would halt about three sales a month.

Clark said he's also asking County Council to pass a law that would waive penalties for back taxes, as long as the taxes are paid by May 31. Delaware has the 10th-highest mortgage-foreclosure rate in the country, Clark said.

The Occupy movement, which began last fall by occupying streets and parks across the country, has been moving into a new phase as participants protest foreclosures and try to prevent evictions. In some cases, protesters of "Occupy Our Homes" have been arrested as they disrupted foreclosure sales.

Although activists continue to protest on Delaware's Legislative Mall, Occupy Dover lost its permit to erect tents there because it was unable to provide portable restrooms.

Occupy Delaware protester Jen Wallace said the encampments are only a part of what the movement is about.

"Even in those places where there are no physical occupations they are still very active," she said.

The city of Wilmington and the protesters' legal representation -- the American Civil Liberties Union of Delaware -- worked out an agreement in November to allow the activists to stay in Spencer Plaza indefinitely.

Wallace said the activists at the Wilmington site have a good relationship with the city, something that not all Occupy groups enjoy.

Although there are fewer tents in Spencer Plaza since winter kicked in, Wallace said, there are still a lot of people showing up for the group's meetings, events and protests. "There are quite a few more people involved with Occupy Delaware than who are just sleeping in tents," she said.

The group will hold a rally at 1 p.m. Saturday at Spencer Plaza, which former Army Lt. Dan Choi will attend. Choi challenged the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy, which forbid gays, lesbians and bisexuals from serving openly until its repeal last year. Choi, an Iraq War veteran, was discharged after coming out on Rachel Maddow's MSNBC show.

Ray Lewis also is scheduled to attend. Lewis, who retired in 2004 from Philadelphia's police, was arrested in full-dress uniform in November after blocking a street and ignoring police orders to move while demonstrating near the New York Stock Exchange. He accepted a deal that will close his disorderly conduct case if he avoids getting re-arrested for six months.

"The tents are important. They are a great symbol," Wallace said. "But I think to a certain extent the tents have detracted from the real message of Occupy.

"A lot of people have focused on the tents and the physical occupation. In the end, we are not about tents."

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