

the purchase price, which would require us to go to court."

The city officially condemned the Wagner's Point community with legislation that took effect April 1. The properties were condemned as a way for the city to acquire the land. The condemnation also allowed the city to give property owners relocation money. Additional funds are expected from the federal government and chemical companies in the area.



Residents of Wagner's Point have been eager to leave the community because of foul odors and a series of cancer deaths they fear are connected to chemical manufacturers and oil tank farms that surround the area.

Larry E. Sturgill, who is looking to move to a small West Virginia farm, is set to have one of his three Wagner's Point properties approved for purchase today so he can go to settlement on his new home.

Sturgill said the city's \$36,000 purchase price for his property in the 3800 block of Leo St. is reasonable. But he has been frustrated with the length of time it has taken to close the deal on that site and the two additional properties he needs the city to purchase so he can buy his new home.

"I got one extension" on the purchase of the property in West Virginia, Sturgill said. "I don't know if I can get another one. I know [the city is] trying to meet a deadline. I'm trying to meet a deadline in West Virginia. But all things considered, they've treated me fair so far."

Some residents, such as Richard Rotosky, say they dislike the prices, but do not have money to hire lawyers and contest the city's appraisals. Rotosky, who also lives in the 3800 block of Leo St., is angry that he will receive \$32,000 for his three-bedroom house, while some neighbors are getting \$50,000 for two bedrooms.

In his kitchen recently, with his dog in his hands, his cat at his feet and two of his birds sleeping a few feet away, Rotosky showed off copies of the appraisals of his home, which he obtained from the city under Freedom of Information Act requests. The appraisals, he noted, include errors about the location of rooms and the nature of the home's heating system.

"I'm very frustrated," he said. "But what can you do about it?"

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## Progress seen in relocation of residents

Board of Estimates expected to OK purchase of 5 Wagner's Point homes

By Ivan Penn  
Sun Staff

The city Board of Estimates today is expected to approve the purchase of five properties in Wagner's Point in another step toward relocating 270 residents who fear ill health because of neighborhood chemical plants.

The properties on the board's agenda today brings to about a dozen the number of homes the city has approved for purchase in the tiny neighborhood in southernmost Baltimore. With the city negotiating to buy about 20 more, about a third of the 92 properties will have been acquired when all the deals are complete.

Sales prices range from \$14,000 to \$58,000, and each property owner also will receive up to \$22,500 in relocation costs, according to Anthony J. Ambridge, the city's real estate officer.

"It's going pretty well," Ambridge said. "We've met with almost everybody. To date, I don't know of anyone who disagreed with



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**Ninety days is not enough time for Wagner's Point residents to prepare to move, Betty Thomas says, "especially for the people who've been here a really long time. People like that really have no place to go."**

of her neighbors be given "at least one year" to move out.

Thomas says 90 days is not enough time for the neighborhood's old, poor, and sick, "especially for the people who've been here for a long time. People like that really have no place to go. Here, they get help. I don't see anywhere else in the state of Maryland where they'd get the kind of security they have here." The state has promised impoverished Wagner's Pointers 5 percent mortgage loans and the federal government has offered \$750,000 in assistance. But Thomas says that will only help residents find new places to live. It will be much harder to replace the community's intangibles, she says: neighbors who look in on the sick and frail, folks who cook for each other, adults who watch each other's children play outside. "People need time to prepare themselves for this," she says.

Although Wagner's Point's approximately 270 residents "look out for their own," Thomas says, the companies that ring the community are considered part of the "security" equation as well. Members of the Fairfield/Wagner's Point Coalition have blamed the two oil companies and four chemical concerns for cancer deaths and "squishing the life out of us" by building close to homes, resident Richard Rotosky says. But Thomas and perhaps a half-dozen other holdouts see surrounding industries as beneficent. Thomas, who doesn't believe that industrial pollution contributes to the declining health of many of her neighbors, becomes angry whenever the area's industrial plants are blamed for residents' problems. "The community has put these companies through so much in the past year, I'm surprised they do anything for us," she says.

But, in an example of the symbiotic relationship that has often existed between industry and this neighborhood since Martin Wagner built his cannery here a century

ago, denizens of Wagner's Point do receive help, Thomas says. When certain neighbors couldn't afford heating oil this winter, Thomas called the nearby Citgo Petroleum Corp. plant, which delivered 100 gallons of free fuel. When resident Kathy Reese had problems coming up with enough money for her April rent, Thomas called Delta Chemical Corp. and got \$100 for Reese; Condea Vista Co. has also offered to help.

### **Thomas' role as a liaison between oil and chemical companies and residents doesn't sit well with many of her neighbors.**

And when Condea Vista and Delta wanted to provide Thanksgiving and Christmas baskets to the neighborhood's indigent, they called Thomas for names and addresses. "The companies have cared for people down here," she says.

Thomas' role as a liaison between companies and residents doesn't sit well with many of her neighbors. Thomas says she was once "good friends" with Rose Hindla, president of the Fairfield/Wagner's Point Coalition, but the two hardly speak now. During Delta Chemical's Christmas giveaway, many neighbors groused that only Thomas' friends received baskets. Others point to the appointment of Thomas to a South Baltimore citizens' advisory panel as a sign she's been co-opted by the companies. "I've been here 45 years and all the companies have done is build up and close us in," Rotosky says. "How does [Thomas] know what happened here 45 years ago?"

But Thomas does have her fans. Reese

says Thomas has made sure that she, her husband, and their disabled son have enough to live on. "When I move from here, I'll miss Betty the most," Reese says, adding that she doesn't expect to find the same kind of neighborly support after she leaves Wagner's Point. "A lot of people are going to be lost when they move from here," she says. "I don't know how we're supposed to find places like this one in so little time. Where else can I pay \$300 a month [in rent]?"

Herbie Smith, who has spent more than 40 years in Wagner's Point, says he has received help from Thomas and the companies when he was "down and out." Smith fears that his sons, Harvey, Jimbo, and Thomas, will lose the thousands of dollars they've invested in racing pigeons. During races, the birds will return to Wagner's Point even if the houses are gone, he says, making them worthless to the Smith brothers. Harvey Smith says he doesn't favor moving because of the potential loss of his prime racing stock.

"If the city wanted to pay them for the pigeons," Herbie Smith says, "I'd probably feel better about [the buyout]." Otherwise, though, he echoes the overwhelming majority of his neighbors. "[Betty Thomas] tells me, 'Ask them for another year,'" Smith says. "But I don't have any say in it. They say you have to move, you move."

Thomas has yet to receive an official response to her letter asking for an extension. In the meantime, the city is pressing forward with the buyout plan. At a March 18 meeting in nearby Brooklyn, city housing officials told Wagner's Pointers to expect letters regarding condemnation by around April 1. The city plans to move a trailer to Wagner's Point early next month to process offers that residents have accepted. Wagner's Point, officials said at the meeting, could be vacant within six months. ■

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## Company Folks

### *Wagner's Point's Last Holdouts Seek Buyout-Plan Extension*

**A**s Betty Thomas surveys Leo Street on a sun-drenched late-winter afternoon, she can't imagine being anywhere else. Neighbors who've known each other for years fix their cars in the street and talk. Children race up and down the sidewalks in pairs. Even the breeze has cooperated to keep this a near-perfect day, sending the stench of the nearby sewage-treatment plant out toward the Patapsco River and away from the neighborhood. "Why would I want to leave all this?" Thomas asks.

But the sense of idyll in Thomas' neighborhood of Wagner's Point is illusory. Surrounded by chemical and oil companies and the sewage plant, Wagner's Point has long been considered a lethal environment by most who live here ("Industrial Waste," 1/20). Thomas, who has made Leo Street her home for seven years, admits she's in the minority in wanting to remain in the soon-to-be-condemned community. Most of her neighbors are eagerly preparing to negotiate a buyout plan with the city (and retaining Orioles' owner and attorney Peter Angelos in pursuit of relocation assistance from the chemical companies). The city plans to begin making offers next month, and get residents out of the neighborhood within 90 days of striking a deal. But in a March 15 letter to Mayor Kurt Schmoke and other city officials, Thomas asks that she and some