SHAMOKIN - Approximately 40 percent of blighted properties targeted by the city were demolished or renovated in the past 18 months. Shamokin police teamed with the code office in 2013 and have since identified 136 properties for enforcement, some of which had been neglected and others damaged by fire or flooding. There were 43 properties knocked down and 10 renovated and brought up to code, according to the police and code departments.

"That ain't bad for 1 1/2 years," Cpl. Bryan Primerano said Tuesday as he leafed through a binder dedicated to the enforcement initiative. "It's not easy to get people to rip a house down," he said, noting the logistics necessary to get multiple owners on board when demolishing properties like half-doubles and row homes.

Nearly $194,000 in grant funding was spent by the city to demolish 12 of the properties. The funds came from the state's Keystone Communities program, and federal money from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and Community Development Block Grants. Private property owners or insurance companies paid for the others. Rick Bozza, code officer, estimated more than $500,000 combined in public and private money was spent on demolition.

Some cases were easy to address with owners willing to demolish blight, or who bought a property expressly for that purpose. Others took convincing through code enforcement. Public nuisance citations were filed against 28 of the property owners, sometimes repeatedly. Seven of the owners who failed to act were subsequently charged with criminal misdemeanors. Primerano said a majority of the cases are active, with some owners addressing the issues.

Cooperation between the code and police departments already underway is among 120 suggestions in a preliminary Act 47 plan created to improve Shamokin's finances. Bozza credited the police with at least doubling what he'd accomplished on his own prior to the joint effort.

"Not only are they getting letters from the code officer, they're getting letters from the Shamokin Police Department," Bozza said of owners of blighted properties. "People take the police letters more seriously."

The enforcement efforts continue. There's a map in the code office indicating blighted properties and color coded for progress. File folders are kept on each one. Bozza said 42 of the remaining 83 properties initially identified are actively targeted for enforcement. Seven properties are scheduled by the city for demolition this year through the Keystone program. The city is seeking control of another five properties through court-approved conservatorship. Those properties would also be demolished.

With dozens of lots now cleared, Bozza said city officials are hopeful that some will be purchased for new construction. He said three lots, including one downtown, have drawn interest. Any revenue from sales would be reinvested in future demolition. The city would only make a profit through resulting property taxes, Bozza said.