

Substandard housing coming down

By NANCY BERGERON

James Ratcliff says his neighborhood immediately got better when the city stepped in to rid the area of two ramshackled, abandoned mobile homes just to the north of his house. A tree had long since fallen across the top of the mobile homes, adding to their unsightliness and danger.

“It was a mess,” said Ratcliff who lives on South Vienna Street. “We’re happy they’re gone.”

Over the last two years, the city has targeted approximately 200 unoccupied structures for demolition or improvement under Ruston’s substandard housing removal program. So far, about 150 of houses have been either torn down or rehabilitated by the owners.

In June of this year alone, 52 structures were demolished and seven brought into compliance. A substandard structure is defined as one that is dilapidated, dangerous, unsafe, unsanitary or otherwise unfit for human habitation or occupancy.

At the urging of citizens, the city has made elimination of substandard housing a Ruston 21 quick-response initiative.

“It was one of the things in the Ruston 21 process that people identified as a growing concern,” Mayor Dan Hollingsworth said.

“So we did a street-by-street inventory,” Ruston Development Services Manager Lori Faile said. “We literally took a map and would highlight each street and what we saw there. We want to find anything that’s not safe.”

That inventory list continues to be updated weekly. Structures deemed to be substandard go through a multi-step process that includes public hearings and an opportunity for the owner to repair the house, before they are recommended to the Board of Aldermen for demolition.

“Our ultimate goal is to identify and improve all substandard structures,” Faile said.

But officials realize that sometimes demolition is the only feasible option.

Eliminating substandard housing increases neighborhood safety and long-term stability, improved property standards, and encourages revitalization and economic development.

“Removal gives rise to the opportunity to replace these structures with something that looks nice, and that’s positive,” Mayor Dan Hollingsworth said. “The next phase is to redevelop these areas with housing that is complimentary to the neighborhoods and to foster home ownership.”

Alderman Elmore Mayfield is a strong advocate of substandard housing removal. He said the city’s efforts have already helped create a new image for his southeast Ruston district. Mayfield credits Hollingsworth with helping that come about.

“If it had not been for Dan Hollingsworth, it would not have happened,” Mayfield said.

“Many of these old homes were warehouses for theft and other illegal activities,” he said. “It was a nightmare and an eyesore, and was causing a depreciation in property for the people who were trying to do something better.”

Getting rid of the blighted structures has not only cut neighborhood crime, but also motivated people to fix up and care for their property, plus gives developers a new reason to look at south Ruston, Mayfield said.

“It really works,” he said.

Alderman Jim Pearce said removal of substandard structures from his northwest Ruston district has restored pride in his area, too.

“Neighborhoods go through a life cycle,” Pearce said. “If we can revitalize the neighborhoods, it’s good for the whole city. It’s helps people’s attitude, and when that happens, we become a much better place.”

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