



Oroville Councilwoman Janet Goodson said the city has to make a priority to clean up debris and blight, particularly in Southside, annexed in 2015.

PHOTO BY ASHIAH SCHARAGA

## Southside's plight

**Oroville residents protest blight in impoverished district**

As Janet Goodson looked at the imposing heap of garbage in front of her, she fell silent. A fetid smell wafted from the piles of refuse spilling into the alleyway parallel to Oro Bangor Highway and Greenville Street in Southside Oroville. Among the detritus: crumbling concrete walls, a broken-down vehicle, a caved-in mattress.

Goodson, an Oroville city councilwoman, has seen this kind of neglect within her neighborhood for years. And she's fed up. She became the first elected official from Southside after its annexation in 2015. Since then, she's attempted to address the disparity between that neighborhood and the rest of the city.

She made some progress the past two years as vice mayor, discovering a vehicle disposal program that also provides funding for code enforcement. But there's still a lot of work to be done. For many council members, it's "out of sight, out of mind," she said—they don't see what she sees every day.

That alleyway is just one example—the neglect is widespread. Goodson led the CN&R down several streets with similar views: piles of rotting trash and wood debris;

boarded-up, crumbling homes; broken-down vehicles.

"This is my neighborhood, and there are good people that live here," Goodson said. "And they feel trapped."

She isn't the only Southside resident who is frustrated. Monday (April 1), more than a dozen community members protested outside a property on the corner of El Noble and Mesa avenues, neighboring Central Middle School. Goodson said it has been a year since the home's roof collapsed and the property was left in a state of disrepair.

That day, children walking by after school chatted nervously while passing the protesters. One cut across the property, stepping over wooden boards with nails sticking out of them.

Pastor Kevin Thompson, a longtime Oroville resident and chief executive officer of the Southside Oroville Community Center, helped rally people that day alongside Goodson, calling on the city to address the property immediately for the safety of the neighborhood and its children. This is not acceptable, nor a good example to be setting, he said.

"We're asking for equality," he told the CN&R later. "The pendulum of justice and humanity has to swing evenly in both directions."

For Bill Bynum, vice president of the local chapter of the NAACP, the situation is one of environmental injustice as well. Neighborhoods on Fort Wayne and Elgin streets are in particularly dire need of attention. "It's not a matter of street lights and sidewalks or even roads," he said. "It's like a poster child of a city neglecting its citizenry."

**Many departments are understaffed** within the city of Oroville, and code enforcement is no exception. It has a core staff of three—a director and two officers. At a recent City Council meeting, Assistant City Administrator Bill LaGrone explained that a code enforcement officer had to get special permission to take up an issue at a home. Though the city has policies and procedures in place, it doesn't have the money to enforce them.

"We've created a program that, through grant funding, we have the personnel, we're able to write a letter, but we have no teeth in that," LaGrone said. "We're a paper tiger."

That night, the council approved \$15,000 to get the department through the rest of the fiscal year. LaGrone said he will propose a "more robust, aggressive" enforcement program for 2019-20. That includes officers identifying a problem and ordering the property

owner to take care of it within 10 days. If nothing changes, a citation will be issued and an administrative hearing process begins, LaGrone said. The city may place a lien on the property in question and seize and sell it if the amount owed exceeds the value.

That effort likely will be buoyed by a pending economic surge put in place by voters.

With the city facing a general fund deficit of nearly \$2 million, mainly due to rising pension costs, residents in November passed a 1 cent sales tax increase. Collection started Monday and is anticipated to generate \$3.7 million per year.

Vice Mayor Scott Thomson told the CN&R the council has to proceed in a fiscally responsible manner for the entire citizenry of Oroville. Southside, where blighted properties and illegal dumping are most concentrated, is still relatively new to the city, he said. However, the issues have been long-standing, he added, and the responsibility for cleanup falls on property owners, as well.

"It's really easy to point a finger at the government and say it's their fault," he said. "[The issue is] definitely not neglected. It's not something we're putting on the back burner."

In the meantime, locals say neighborhoods are languishing. Take Liza West's situation, for example.

She lives on Mesa Avenue and has made multiple complaints to the city about the aforementioned property near the middle school, she told the CN&R. She always ends up leaving messages. West added that she understands the city has been "terribly poor," and is hopeful the sales tax increase will help spur action.

"Of course you're frustrated. What can you do?" she said. "I just cover my eyes when I walk past. And that's not a solution, is it?"

For Goodson, the buck stops with her fellow City Council members. She hopes the panel will listen to the pleas from her neighborhood.

"If this is not a priority, then it will continue," Goodson said. "It is my hope that this new council really takes a hard look at addressing this problem."

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