

A Neighborhood Cancer Grows

By Robert Arnold

<http://www.click2houston.com/news/24624615/detail.html>

POSTED: Friday, August 13, 2010

UPDATED: 10:00 pm CDT August 13, 2010

HOUSTON -- In northwest Houston, many residents are complaining the city is allowing decaying, filth-ridden properties to destroy their community and peace of mind.

Two years ago, the city promised it was working hard to address the concerns of residents living near two sprawling apartment and condominium complexes that had become breeding grounds for disease and magnets for crime. When Local 2 checked on the city's progress at the complexes off Desoto and Antoine Drive, we discovered nothing had changed.

At the Candlewood Glenn complex, we found the same piles of trash, syringes, rotting food and pools of broken glass in the same units Local 2 Investigates visited in 2008. The only differences were a broken toilet in the middle of the road, more gang graffiti and an abandoned refrigerator on a sidewalk with dead animals rotting inside. Most of the units were open to the elements, the trash Dumpster was overflowing and the complex's pool was covered in algae -- all violations of city code.

Next door to Candlewood Glenn is Candlelight Trails, an abandoned complex filled with trash and rodents.

"It's terrible, it's terrible that people have to live across the street from this kind of fear," said resident Jewel Peoples, who lives across from the Candlelight Trails complex. "This is fear." Residents said the complex has become a hiding place for the homeless, drug addicts and criminals.

"You stay by yourself, there's always a fear that someone is going to come around and do things," said Peoples. "Right here in the street, I watched three boys rob someone, right there by gunpoint."

"They have homeless people sleeping in those buildings, drug addicts, stray animals, snakes. There's debris everywhere," said resident Lydia Hughes.

One street over from these complexes, residents have been asking the city to tear down another complex on Holly View. The complex was abandoned after a fire destroyed several units.

"I don't want to bring any relatives down the street because they'll see all the abandoned buildings," said resident Charlene McCullough. "They probably say, 'Why you living somewhere like this?' you know."

Two years ago, the city said the process to demolish Candlelight Trails was cumbersome. The complex was made up of individually owned condominiums and state law required the city to track down and properly serve every owner with legal notice the property was being considered for demolition. After two years and thousands of taxpayer dollars, the city is finally going to court next month to ask a judge for the right to tear down the decaying eyesore.

Due in large part to the efforts of state rep. Sylvester Turner, state law has since changed. Now, the city only has to send legally required notices to the an owner's last known address on file with the Harris County Appraisal District.

As for Candlewood Glenn, the city is facing a similar situation. Fifty-six of the units are apartments with a single owner, and 36 units are condominiums with individual owners. However, when Local 2 tried to speak with officials at the city's Neighborhood Protection Department about the obvious health hazards at the complex, our questions were deflected to the city's legal department.

City Attorney David Feldman, who inherited this mess from his predecessor, said he has put together a working group made up of people from several city departments. Feldman said the group is dedicated to eradicating neighborhood blight, including the complexes in the Antoine corridor. Feldman said he hopes to have all the complexes demolished within six months. Feldman added the city is considering replacing those properties with either detention ponds or city parks.

Turner said the effort long overdue.

"I cannot explain this situation to the people in my district," said Turner. "I can't explain it and neither should the city be able to explain it."

Turner said when he talked with officials at Neighborhood Protection about the conditions at Candlewood Glenn, he was told the city did not have the authority to enter the second floor of a person's property. Many of the units at Candlewood Glenn are second floor units. Turner said he was also told it's hard for the city to take action against property owners it can't find.

"What I said to Neighborhood Protection today in my e-mail is, 'I won't be contacting you anymore,'" said Turner. "Why would I waste the time to call you if you're telling me you can't do anything?"

Fed up with what he characterized as the city's inaction, Turner created the Antoine Corridor Coalition to help the city get decaying complexes torn down and bring in federal grant money to help improve the area.

"Putting a citation on the door, on the building is not going to remove this trash, this debris, this public health hazard," said Turner.

While Local 2 Investigates was checking Candlewood Glenn, we noticed red tags posted by Neighborhood Protection. The tags informed owners of the abandoned units they had to properly secure their properties or face citations. These are the same type of notices Local 2 spotted in 2008, yet nothing had changed.

Inspectors with the city's Public Works and Engineering Department have also been to the complex and posted notices that the handful of occupied units had no valid Certificates of Occupancy.

On Thursday, the city also turned off the water to occupied units at Candlewood Glenn due to lack of payment. Turner was able to convince the city to turn the water back on saying the low-income families living in the complex were being punished unfairly. The city agreed and Turner is now working to find those families other places to live in the area since the city cannot provide free water indefinitely.

Late Friday afternoon, the owner of several units at the Candlewood Glenn complex had a warrant issued for his arrest. Houston police told local 2 that Tuan Nguyen failed to show up for court Friday morning to answer for several citations issued against the complex. Police said even more citations were issued to Nguyen earlier Friday. Police said Nguyen lives in Travis County. **If you have a news tip or question for KPRC Local 2 Investigates, drop them an [e-mail](#) or call their tipline at (713) 223-TIPS (8477).**

Copyright 2010 by Click2Houston.com. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.