

Cleanup highlights effort to jump-start development east of downtown Anchorage

Devin Kelly
Alaska Dispatch News

Hoping to reverse what they see as years of deterioration, property owners in east downtown Anchorage have been quietly fixing up run-down homes, log cabins and businesses that extend for a few blocks up the hill from the Brother Francis Shelter and the jail.

It's an effort that became more public and pointed last week, with a clean-up of the empty former site of the Alaska Native Medical Center on East Third Avenue. With city permission, a group of yellow-vested volunteers fanned out across the 15-acre stretch of land and loaded up trash bags.

Most of the volunteers also own property right across the street. City officials weren't aware of a recent instance of a citizen group organizing a clean-up there.

"Our basic theme here is, we believe in east downtown," said Jim Renkert, whose family owns three houses at the corner of East Third Avenue and Gambell Street.

Renkert is part of a loose association of property and business owners called the East Downtown Action Group. More recently, an even more tight-knit group has formed to focus on a few blocks in the East Third Avenue area, which Renkert has jokingly called the "Third Avenue Radicals."

The property owners feel the area has borne the brunt of the dysfunction that can spill over from the social services agencies and correctional facilities. In the 1970s, this was a vibrant area and a promising investment, Renkert said, when hotels were being built and the hospital was there.

The hospital moved to the university medical district in the 1990s. Its old home has sat empty for years, fenced off and overgrown, about 15 acres on a bluff overlooking the Ship Creek industrial area. It's owned by the city and is being used as trailer storage.

A few months ago, someone hung up a fake sign: "Coming Soon: Whole Foods." That sign brought attention to the area, as did a sign erected by property owner Rob Cupples about what he suspected was drug-dealing happening on his street.

At the same time, real ideas have been swirling for the property, particularly the concept of an urban farm. Downtown Assemblyman Chris Constant is one of the big proponents of the farm idea, and has enlisted the help of the Alaska Food Policy Council to draw up a plan.

The property has some degree of contamination, and it's also in a seismic zone vulnerable to earthquakes, which



Photos by LOREN HOLMES / Alaska Dispatch News
Gary Lose picks up trash at the old Alaska Native Medical Center on Third Avenue on Friday. Lose, who says he has been homeless for six years, was recruited from Bean's Cafe by Jonath Rendon, president of the Alaska Responsible Beverage Association, which was helping with the cleanup effort.



Anchorage Downtown Partnership employee Nick Green gathers trash at the old Alaska Native Medical Center on Third Avenue on Friday. The Heritage Land Bank, which owns the property, granted organizers an authorization to conduct the cleanup effort.

affects what can be built there, said Nicole Jones-Vogel, land management officer for the Heritage Land Bank, the city agency that manages public real estate. Jones-Vogel said a federal grant to clean up blighted properties could be used to clean up the property, and the property is also the focus of discussions this fall around under-used public parcels in town.

Jones-Vogel said the city is open to the urban farm idea. But there isn't yet a clear path forward, she said.

In the meantime, Renkert and others said they want to kick-start discussions around the property — and help make it look nicer.

On Friday afternoon, trash bags filled up with

run-of-the-mill trash, like empty bottles, socks, pieces of wood, cigarette butts and plastic cups and lids. Someone picked up a dead cat. Jamie Boring, of the Downtown Partnership, found a shrew colony hunkered down under a wooden board by the fence.

With the tall grass, it was hard to tell how much trash had actually been picked up. But Renkert said every little bit counts.

Many property owners share the frustration of Ron Alleva of Grubstake Auction Co., and say the concentration of social services in the area have hurt the neighborhood.

But where Alleva made noise, literally, last month by blasting train horns, sirens and emergency alarms to



"Whiners and complainers need not show up."
— Jim Renkert of the East Downtown Action Group

draw attention, Renkert advocates a more subtle approach.

"We're focusing on the assets, we're fixing up our properties," Renkert said.

Renkert's family owns three houses at the corner of East Third Avenue and Gambell Street, which they rent at market rates. The family tore down a fourth house that was dilapidated. Across the street, the federal government is trying to sell a foreclosed home.

Further down, Rob Cupples and his family have owned property, including a duplex, since the 1950s. At the

clean-up Friday, Cupples said he's been working in recent months to fix up his properties, and is slowly seeing signs of change, like new construction behind the church by the print and design shop.

Renkert said his group isn't focused on solving the social problems in the area. But he said they do want to be involved in discussions about future development, and help take action.

"Whiners and complainers need not show up," Renkert added.

Man pulls knife on employees in hardware store robbery

Laurel Andrews
Alaska Dispatch News

Anchorage police are looking for a robbery suspect who pulled a knife on employees at Andy's Ace Hardware before dropping his car keys and fleeing on foot Monday morning.

Police got a call about the robbery at the Muldoon hardware store around 11:45 a.m. Monday, spokesperson MJ Thim wrote in a release.

Store owner Stephanie Van Nees said the man was stealing tools, including saw blades, which he had shoved up his sleeve.

One employee confronted the man, Van Nees said. The two got in a scuffle and the suspect bit the employee's arm. A second employee approached them. The suspect pulled a knife on the two employees and then fled, Van Nees said.

On his way to his car, the suspect dropped some of the stolen items, along with his car keys. So, he fled on foot. Police said they aren't sure which way he ran.

Police describe the suspect as a white male in his 30s with a short reddish-brown beard and a "lazy" right eye. He was last seen wearing blue jeans, a white undershirt, black zip-up sweatshirt jacket and black baseball cap.

Police are reviewing surveillance footage of the incident, and they also spoke with other employees and customers in the store during the robbery. There were about 20 people in the store during the robbery, Van Nees said.

"I just think it's getting out of control and ridiculous," Van Nees said of crime in Anchorage. "We've been in business 58 years ... we've never had crimes involving weapons and this is the second one in three months," she said.

In June, a man fired several bullets at the store's cash register during a robbery. A security guard shot the man as he fled, and he was taken to a local hospital. The suspect, William Travis McCann, was later found guilty of robbery, assault, and misconduct involving a weapon. He was sentenced to 28 years in prison.

CORRECTIONS

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Driver pistol-whipped in carjacking; police seek missing Mercedes

Alex DeMarban
Alaska Dispatch News

Anchorage police want the public's help finding a car after its driver was pistol-whipped and the car stolen by a "group of males" Sunday morning, a police spokesman said.

The theft of the black, four-door 1996 Mercedes-Benz took place in the Mountain View neighborhood of northeast Anchorage. Police received a report of the theft at 9:54 a.m. Sunday.

The carjacking did not appear to be linked to other crimes, including a reported Saturday carjacking and the Sunday arrest of five

teenagers following a 10-minute armed crime spree in the Spenard area around 2 a.m., said MJ Thim, a police spokesman.

"We don't believe this was a targeted attack," he said.

The missing Mercedes is a C22 model with tinted windows, Thim said.

The violent theft occurred after a group of males walked up to the car at the intersection of Klewin Street and Peterkin Avenue, police said. They pointed guns at the driver, pulled him out of the car and hit him on the back of the head before stealing the car, Thim said.

The car had Alaska license

plate GVT807, police said.

Thim urged victims to call police as quickly as possible after a crime. In this case, the victim waited 30 minutes to an hour before calling police, Thim said. He said he did not know why the report to police was delayed.

Thim said the victim suffered minor injuries.

Police are also looking for surveillance video or other information related to the carjacking. People with tips can call 907-786-8900 or 907-561-STOP. Tips can be shared online at anchoragerecristoppers.com.

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