

# Weekly County working to address issues of crime, rundown buildings

March 23rd, 2016 by **Katie Ward** in Community Walker Read Time: 4 mins.



Mountain View Estates owner David A. Roden stands in front of one of the new homes in his subdivision in the north end of Walker County. He hopes the county will clean up some of the dilapidated properties around his subdivision.

Photo by Contributed Photo /Times Free Press.



This crumbling old store covered with tarps sits...

Photo by Contributed Photo /Times Free Press.

In the time since Walker County residents packed into the sanctuary at Mission Glen Baptist Church March 1 to share concerns and discuss solutions, County Commissioner Bebe Heiskell said a county codes enforcement officer has cited people for burned-out homes still standing. Now that the problem has been called to the owners' attention, Heiskell feels like the properties will be cleaned up.

"We are trying to do what David Roden wants us to do," she said. "It will take community pride to do this cleanup, not just the county. I think we are on the right

## By the numbers

### 2014

329 burglaries

### 2015

302 burglaries

### 2016 year-to-date

28 burglaries

## Eyes and ears

The Walker County Sheriff's Office has Neighborhood Watch programs. Deputies lead free sessions on how to establish one for interested communities. Deputies can also go to homes to check windows and door locks, said Sheriff Steve Wilson.

track and moving forward. No one hates an eyesore more than me."

Roden, who owns the Mountain View Estates mobile home park on Wilson Road, and Walker County Sheriff Steve Wilson organized the March community meeting to help get everyone on the same page. Roden has been complaining since January 2015 about the state of some area properties, saying they not only decrease property values, but are a breeding ground for crime.

"People think they can come in and rent homes cheap and crime has gone up and no one would talk about it," he said in a followup interview. "The burned-out homes surrounding [Mountain View Estates] lowers property values and promotes crime, and kids get in there and get hurt. People look and see it and think the community does not care, so people dump tires. This burned-out house adjoins my property. If it was torn down it could generate property taxes if someone built there."

Roden's hosted other meetings of residents with similar complaints, growing from meeting at Rossville Elementary School to taking over the sanctuary at Mission Glen Baptist Church, he said. Roden said approximately 120 people attended the March 1 meeting.

"We were discussing the condition of the north end of Walker County," he said. "It's been neglected and more and more homes are becoming dilapidated. Homes that burned years ago are allowed to stand and businesses have tarps on top."

In addition to dilapidated buildings, attendees named crime and the lack of business development as main concerns, said local resident Jim Hill, who kicked off the meeting.

"There's a lot of concerned residents on this end of the county that feel we've been neglected," said Roden. "We'd like to bring back people that can address crime in neighborhoods. Every community can make decisions. We want to have a closer relationship with the sheriff. We have to be his eyes and ears. We want Walker County to be the best it can be."

He said a planning committee comprised of himself, Sheriff Wilson, Schools Superintendent Damon Raines, Scott Hardeman, Susan Wells, Jim Hill, Bruce Coker and John Hooper has been formed.

Wilson said the planning committee will meet again, and another community meeting will be held.

"We will meet again to make sure things are moving forward to look better in the community," said Heiskell. "We are working as hard as we can under the circumstances. The roads department, codes enforcement and building official all attended the meeting. David Roden's investment is nice and the people there want to keep it nice. And we are doing what we can to accommodate it."

According to Roden, one of the buildings near his property which he objected to has been demolished by the county since the meeting. Two other homes were demolished in the last year that he previously complained about, he added.

"I think everyone would benefit if we could get rid of old, rundown properties," he said. "I started talking about Wilson Road, but really it's the whole northern end of Walker County. A half a mile from my business, it's bad."

### **Crime**

Wilson said the Walker County Sheriff's Office did a three-year study of just the Wilson Road corridor that looked at the number of incidents of burglary, larceny and murder between 2013 and 2015. The bulk of the crimes were burglaries and thefts, he said, while both the murder and robbery rates were consistently low.

He said deputies respond to an average of 300 break-ins annually, as averaged out over the last 15 years.

"National statistics say a high percentage of people will be a victim of a property crime," said Wilson, himself a victim of property crime. "Property crimes are the main crimes that rural sheriff's departments deal with. Visibility in the community does help. It does take a partnership working with law enforcement with good communication. Not all cases can be prevented and not all cases can be solved."

Unfortunately, Wilson said, Walker County's property crimes don't have a high clearance rate, but then again, neither does the United States overall. Walker County's clearance rate for property crimes is about 23 percent, he said. The national average ranges from 12 to 13 percent, said Wilson. Clearance means someone was arrested and the property was recovered, he explained.

"We encourage people, if they see an unusual vehicle in the neighborhood or if someone is on foot going door to door, to call us," Wilson said. "If you see something that does not look right, it's probably not right. Citizens are the eyes and ears of the community. We have to depend on them to work with law enforcement. We want to resolve crime and stop crime from happening."