

ROSSVILLE — Residents packed the pews inside Mission Glen Baptist Church and listened as Walker County, Ga., leaders preached hope for their community's future.

"It's time to come together," local resident Jim Hill told the crowd of about 120 on Tuesday night. "It's time to make a difference. You are making a difference. You. Are. Making a difference."

"We can reinvent our community. We can make it great again," said Susan Wells, coordinator of the Walker County Family Connection.

David Roden, owner of the Mountain View Estates mobile home park on Wilson Road, and Walker County Sheriff Steve Wilson organized Tuesday's group gathering. They hoped the event would allow residents to express frustrations about what they believe to be a growing crime rate and too many rundown buildings in Rossville. From the beginning, however, Roden made it clear to those in attendance that the meeting was supposed to be more of a pep rally than a think tank.

He said they were not going to find solutions Tuesday evening, or even bounce ideas off each other. He simply wanted to hear from the people and create a network. From there, who knows?

"I don't know what the answer is because I don't know what the end result will be yet," Roden said after the meeting. "We may not even be able to conceive it in our minds yet."

During the meeting, residents in attendance were asked to fill out notecards with their contact information, as well as what issues concern them the most about Rossville. Hill said the three most common problems people brought up were crime, dilapidated buildings and the lack of business development.

Roden said after the meeting the Walker County planning committee will review the cards and decide how best to address these issues going forward. He was not sure whether that will mean more community meetings, the creation of several task forces or another form of community outreach.

But he made it clear he hopes this will be a resident-led effort to improve the county.

Under the leadership of Roden, the county's planning committee met for the first time on Feb. 25. The group also consists of Wilson, Hill, Wells, schools Superintendent Damon Raines, Ridgeland High School teacher Scott Harden, Ridgeland High School resource officer Bruce Coker, resident Mike Cameron and resident Jon Hooper.

During the meeting, Wilson said the sheriff's office is trying to curb the property crime rate, though he added that his squad of deputies cannot keep up with every break-in. By their nature, he said, those cases are difficult to solve. He also floated the idea that the sheriff's office, with the proper funding, could create a phone app that would update everyone interested in the community of all break-in reports.

Those in attendance also watched a slideshow of rundown, abandoned buildings in Rossville.

Roden told the crowd he was proud of his community when he opened his mobile home park 28 years ago. He bought 48 acres from the Hutcheson family estate. He said the homes around him were pretty and the businesses down the street were thriving.

Then textile plants closed, and people left their buildings, and grass began to grow wild, and trash began to litter the roads, and spare tires began to spot the abandoned properties.

"We began, I guess, to get used to it," Roden said. "We just sort of accepted it. We thought, 'That's the way it's supposed to be.'"

Contact staff writer Tyler Jett at tjett@timesfreepress.com or at 423-757-6476.



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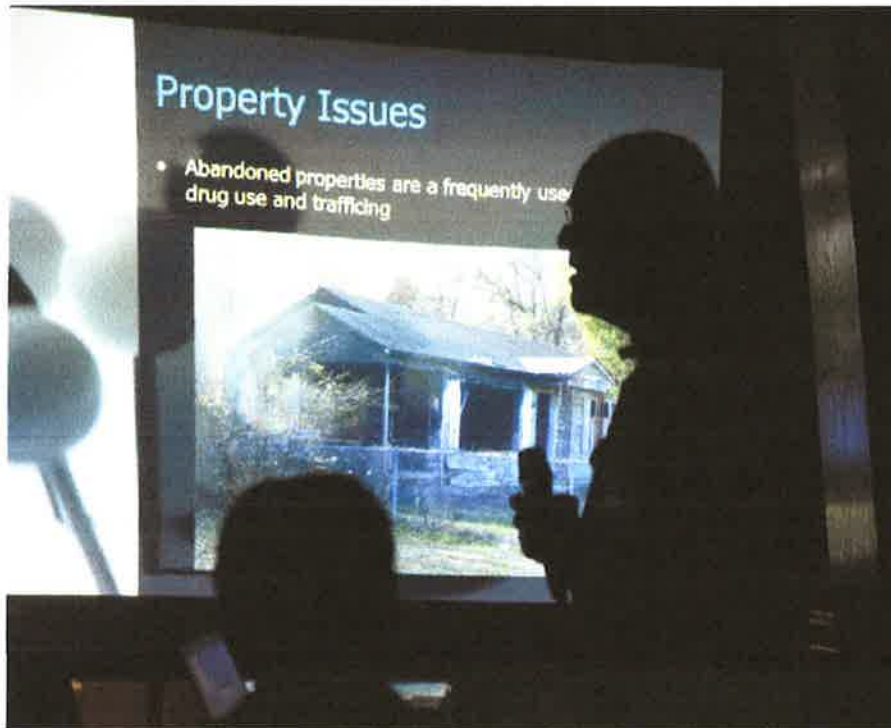
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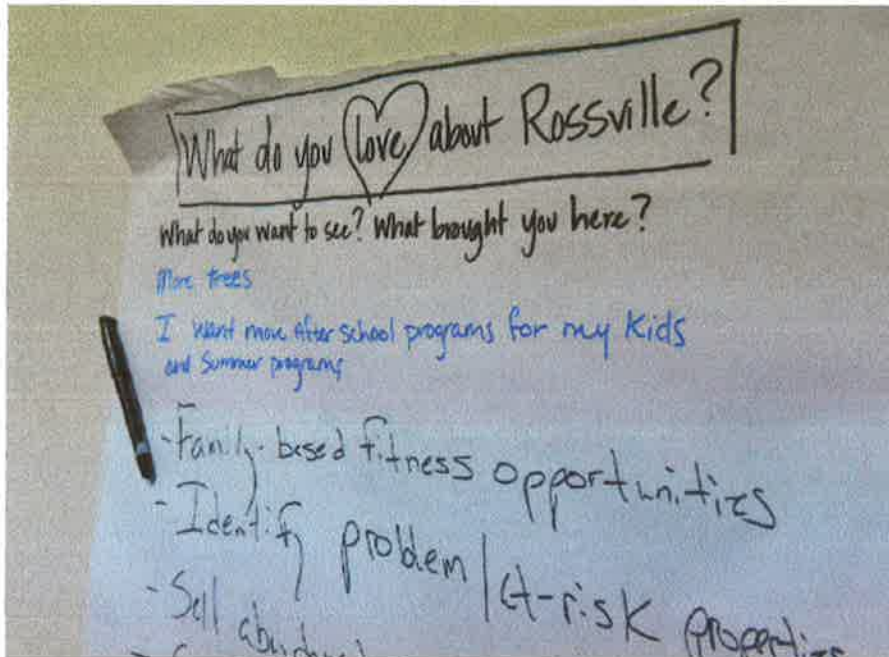


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