

* Housing ordinance draws lots of attention

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2009, and in March of 2010, Jan Ackerman was hired as the code enforcement officer and asked to handle the 10 complaints the city had received about properties.

In December 2011, the City Council changed the ordinance to say that two people – both at least 18 and residents of Oberlin – had to sign a complaint. A complaint also can be filed by the city administrator, police chief or fire chief. In July, after complaints from the other side, that was amended to also include the code enforcement officer.

Before that, said City Councilman Rusty Addleman, people who favored a strong cleanup ordinance kept coming to council meetings, upset and angry about the two-person rule, saying that people were targeting each other for petty reasons, and that the ordinance was turning neighbor against neighbor.

The council decided to bring the code officer in on the ordinance, Mr. Addleman said, because she wasn't from Oberlin and wouldn't have friendships on the line, someone who could enforce the ordinance without bias.

Mrs. Ackerman is the enforcement officer for several neighboring cities, including Rexford. After she was limited to handling complaints signed by two or more people, she came to the council to ask that they change the ordinance.

Every other city she works for, she said, allows her to drive around and cite properties she sees that are violating the ordinance.

The council had tied her hands, she said, because she wasn't a resident, and wasn't that the point of them hiring her?

So the council did what she asked, Mr. Addleman said. They left the option for two neighbors to sign a complaint, but also granted the officer access to any property within the city. The change was made on a 3-2 vote, with Rob McFee, now the mayor, and Fonda Farr voting against it. Councilmen Jim Miesner, Rusty Addleman and Josh Williby voted in favor of the change.

But now some people say Mrs. Ackerman is doing her job too well, or at least, too much. People in the audience at the last meeting said that they had been cited for "minuscule" violations that didn't blight their property, or for violations they'd never committed. Elderly and disabled people stood to denounce Mrs. Ackerman, asking how they could be given such a letter when they no longer had the ability to do what the letter told them to.

"Well, I have mixed emotions," said Mr. Addleman, talking on the phone the day after the meeting. "We hired an officer to do her job, we had tied her hands, and I would venture to say that Jan followed the ordinance as it is written."

"There's this committee set up by Decatur Tomorrow, the beautification committee, and they have been trying to do what they feel will help clean up the city and make it more appealing, not so trashy. There are some places that are really trashy. The group was following the ordinance where a complaint had to be signed by two adult

residents. And when that was (initially) passed, it left Jan out of the equation.

"It didn't give her any teeth to perform her job. The concern initially was that the way it was written was going to pit neighbor against neighbor. And the idea that if you had an officer, not from here, a disinterested party, hopefully it wouldn't cause this strife. Any way you look at it, it's not going to be satisfactory for everybody."

He sighed and continued in a resigned tone.

"I think the council will re-look into it, to see how it can be changed or modified. A number of people were cited for things they don't think were fair, and that's one of the things we'll look into."

The Officer

One problem, of course, is that the ordinance has already been amended twice.

Mrs. Ackerman came to work with the city in March 2010 at the recommendation of the city attorney, Steve Hirsch, who is also the city attorney for Rexford. She and former City Administrator Austin Gilley started negotiations in November 2009, and by March 2010, the council approved a contract with her company, White Barn Services, to enforce the city code on blighted properties.

One of the many points that came up at the most recent meeting was that of Mrs. Ackerman's qualifications. She said she has a bachelor's degree in secondary education, but has worked for newspapers in the circulation department and as a reporter.

She also operates a licensed private investigation firm.

When asked if she'd ever had problems with residents in other towns, she said she'd only seen the usual complaints before, nothing like the crowd here.

Mrs. Ackerman said three properties in Oberlin have benefitted from the Connections program which she suggested to the city as an alternative to demolishing some houses. The program offers a way for the city to take blighted properties that are delinquent in taxes and not being used, and match them up with people who want to get them refurbished and back in use.

"I believe the negative tone to code enforcement started in July 2011, when an individual who received a notice to abate sought out a mutual thinker and they ultimately promoted a change of the city ordinance through council action," Mrs. Ackerman said. "Oberlin's ordinances are not unlike those throughout Kansas..."

She said she comes through town about twice a month to see if the owners of houses who received a notice have followed through and fixed the problem.

As for the uproar against what she does and how she does it, she said it grieves her.

The Solution

Everyone interviewed for this story agreed on one thing – that the people of Oberlin can get together and take care of this problem themselves.

And the City Council, for its part, has

already made two big changes. The city has reworded the letter sent out to residents. It is now clear, concise, and without emotion or insult – it simply states the facts. Second, the city came together with the county last week to establish a free week for dumping at the county landfill to help people who need to clean up their property.

A common thread among council members – those questioning the ordinance and those who support it – is that residents should get together and organize volunteers to help those with run-down property get it back into shape. A cleanup day or series of days has been suggested, too.

People commenting on the Oberlin, KS, Facebook page suggested that groups from churches, Scouts, 4-H, Rotary and other clubs could pitch in. Not everything said on the page was nice or even constructive, but it got people talking.

The latest word on the Internet is that those who came together to voice their concern, and those that disagree with them, are all planning on being at the council meeting Thursday. It looks like they're coming to talk about not just the ordinance, and whether it should be changed, but what we can do about things in the meantime.

"I hope we can overcome the air of hostility," said Councilman Addleman, "and overcome this together and resolve it with a reasonable manner. I was born here and grew up here, and we'd just like to see the town flourish and get back working together."

Former resident complains of rundown property in town

By STEPHANIE DeCAMP
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Kay Harold of Clinton, Iowa a former Oberlin resident, said she was upset at what she saw when she came back after four years for the Decatur County Fair.

"My family has been residents of Decatur until four years ago," she said, "and I was quite alarmed with what I saw. I hadn't been back since my parents passed away. The town was always so clean and neat. I saw so many dilapidated properties, and it was shocking. All in the space of four years."

And she wasn't the only former resident who was surprised, said Councilman Rusty Addleman. Nor was this the first time he's heard the complaint.

"A lot of people from out of town come in over Memorial Day weekend," he said, "and a number of people heard comments from previous residents who said that when they were here, there was pride in the community and how it

looked. People were disappointed with what they were seeing when they came back."

That's when the real push to revamp the town started, he said.

"Then here again, we had the fair, and a lot of people come back for that," he continued. "And we hear those complaints all over again. They're talking about how the town doesn't look as neat as it used to be."

"Now there's conflict, and the atmosphere isn't good to have in a healthy community. I don't think anything we come up with will satisfy everybody, and that's just the way it is."

Mr. Addleman was referring to the latest City Council meeting, on Thursday, Aug. 16, when residents packed the meeting room at The Gateway to protest an ordinance that regulates "blighted" property. The people who weren't there, though – the people who "remember Oberlin the way it used to be," according to Ms. Harold, quickly lit up the city's

Facebook page to weigh in on the debate.

Ms. Harold, who called in response to the conversation on that page, said she has a lot of friends still living in Oberlin who can't sell their properties because of the way their neighbors' property looks.

"That is not the way the town has been for years," she said. "I don't know what's transpired, but people in Oberlin never had trash in the front yards, cars that wouldn't run or peeling paint on homes. Oberlin is a community where people did take care of their own."

"I have been an environmental scientist for 15 years," she said, "and I've worked in health care for years, so I know the hazards when things are let go. There were hazardous materials just sitting around on properties, and it's not safe for kids. So there were aesthetic problems, properties that are not pleasing to the eye, but there were also health hazards and rats, and that's not safe at all."

* Airport will soon be ready to go

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project, he said, the government and the city will have spent \$12 million on the entire deal.

Congress is considering a change back to paying 95 percent, the Library of Congress reports, so it's possible the city will get a break, but far from certain.

With phase 1, Mr. Fraker said, the airport will not be going up in class, which determines the size of airplanes that can land here.

The largest planes the airport will be bringing in are Beech KingAirs, two-engine turboprop airplanes. These are the airplanes typically used as air ambulances.

The Decatur County Hospital has been calling for a helicopter over the summer while the airport repairs are being made.

Administrator Lynn Doeden said that there have been advantages to using the helicopter, but at least one visiting doctor (a cardiologist who was coming to see patients in the specialty clinic) cancelled because he couldn't fly in.

"The problem is that the helicop-

ter comes right to our doorstep," Mrs. Doeden said. "When we use the airplane here in town, we still have to use the ambulance to transport the crew and patients to and from the airport."

"It's not ideal. Sometimes you can't get a helicopter in here, but we haven't had that problem yet. But I'm sure it will happen."

Whatever mode of air transport is available, she said, the patient will be taken care of, "because we want the patients to get the best help they can."

Under newer federal regulations, the old runway for was too close to the highway and the county fairgrounds, said Construction Observer Rick Emley, and had to be shortened by 600 feet on the south end.

The rebuilding added 400 feet on the north end. Other repairs included removing the pavement from the apron area, which serves as parking for airplanes, and the taxiway and replacing it with new concrete.

Six inches of concrete have been

added to the taxiway and apron area, and 3 inches of asphalt have been layered onto the runway, Mr. Emley said. The whole lot is getting new edge lighting and electrical controls.

Mr. Emley said that the lighting still needs to be finished, as does rewiring the windsock and moving the wind indicator.

There is still some concrete paving, sawing and sealing to complete, and last but not least, the final grading, seeding and mulching of the surrounding area, and then pavement marking.

Mr. Emley said he works for Lochner Engineering, which has been working with Smokey Hill, a heavy-construction firm out of Salina, the general contractor for the job. Atlas Electric of Wichita came in Monday, Aug. 27, to start the electrical work.

"(Smokey Hill) has been excellent to work with," said Mr. Emley, "and of course, the City of Oberlin. (City Administrator) Karen Larson, and especially Bob here, have been excellent to work with, too."



THE DROUGHT WORRIES farmer Roger Wilson, who helped to contain the small fire Wednesday northeast of town with his shovel. There's not much moisture for wheat planting, which is to begin within the month, he said, and a second crop failure could be devastating.

— Herald staff photo by Stephanie DeCamp

* Adjusters looking at corn fields

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nitrate, too.

"Insurance adjusters are looking at field strips. Some say zero bushels, some say 17 and some say 30-40 bushels. It depends on subsoil moisture storage and conditions at pollination."

Mr. Callander wasn't so optimistic.

"It's terrible," he said. "In the 25 years that I've been in this business, this has been the worst I've ever seen it. What they do pick, it'll make 20, 25 bushels an acre, tops."

"It hurts everybody," he said, when asked how the elevators are coping with the losses. Farmers have insurance, he pointed out, but nobody else does when it comes to the crops.

"We're just kind of left out. The more bushels we take, the better it gets, but when you ain't got the bushels, it's a big deal. If we'd gotten even one rain in August, it would have made a difference. I think some of the ethanol plants are going to close down over this."

"And what are the feed lots going to do for corn? If they don't have it, they'll have to ship it in, and that's a lot of money."

"But basically, it's hurting a lot of people, anything having to do with agriculture. The whole world runs on (corn). People just don't look at it that way, but it's true."

Mr. Callander said the firm has

around 20 elevators in Oklahoma and Kansas, and none of them is doing well.

And when it comes to planting the wheat, well, that depends on rain as well.

"You're not going to do it without moisture," said Shawn Diederich of Diederich Agronomy in Colby. "Some areas got some pretty good rain last week, but it will depend on how hot and dry we'll stay between

now and the wheat planting. The ground gets pretty hard, and you have to have some moisture to get the drills in the ground for planting, so farmers will have to use deep drills."

With the wheat, a lot will depend on this fall and winter, Mr. Diederich said. Even if we get some good rain this fall, if it doesn't stick through into the spring, the wheat can still die.

* Fund raiser set to help sick child

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Carter of Jennings. Mrs. Kuhlman's sisters, Kasey and Brianna Cook, are organizing the event. Other helpers will be Eric's grandparents, Tami and Brian Cook, Norcatar, and Ron and Raye Kuhlman, Oakley. Also on the menu will be salads, desserts and a special cake with Eric's picture on it.

Everyone is invited. Donations will be accepted.

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