

Revitalization and Restoration of Neighborhoods –

“ONE BLOCK AT A TIME”



“If not now, when? If not us, then who?” These questions, in various forms, have been posed by philosophers and elected officials for centuries. Now, Mayor Deloris “Bobbie” Prince asks the same questions and provides a clear, unwavering, answer – “The time is now! We will lead the charge!”

The Mayor and City Council of Port Arthur have launched an aggressive program to revitalize and restore the city’s neighborhoods utilizing the “One Block At A Time” initiative. Although, the program has been in the planning and development stages for several months, it was officially unveiled at a program “roll out” meeting held at DeQueen



Mayor Deloris “Bobbie” Prince
Photo taken by OTRA Hispanic Media

Elementary School, which is located in the program’s pilot area.

The “One Block At A Time” Program is designed to include all segments of the community. It establishes a platform for partnerships and networking in the city to begin. It sets in motion the task of revitalizing and restoring the city’s neighborhoods and the cleaning up of unattractive areas of the city. It focuses on increased code enforcement, neighborhood stabilization and crime fighting.

The program uses a multi-faceted approach to address what the Mayor and City Council view as a dire need of the city. It anticipates involvement of all segments of the city. It crosses all socio-economic, ethnic and geographic lines. The program’s goal is to enhance civic pride and restore the city’s aesthetic beauty.

There are several key components which are designed to undergird the program’s success. One pillar of the program’s foundation is the role of the City in facilitating the success of its partners. Key to the success of this initiative is the commitment / appropriation of fiscal and human resources. At its January 13, 2009 City Council meeting, the City Council unanimously voted a budget amendment which provided \$260,000 to fund the “One Block At A Time” Program. The funding covers program costs for approximately nine (9) months and includes: advertising, communication, office supplies, software, surveillance cameras, educational programs, and extra help.



Additionally, the program has been funded to provide \$50,000 in overtime primarily for Public Works to allow them to increase efforts in trash collection, \$25,000 to provide a vehicle for the program to increase visibility and assist staff in carrying out program tasks, \$20,000 for graffiti removal equipment, and \$5,000 for temporary help. As further evidence of the City’s planning and commitment, \$40,000 has been allocated as salary for a Neighborhood Development Specialist position in the Planning and Community Development Department.

This individual will be responsible for a broad range of administrative and coordinating duties, including meeting with individuals and neighborhood groups, coordinating efforts between City departments to address concerns and issues, facilitating neighborhood beautification and restoration projects, assisting in grant applications to secure funds to support program goals, and creating/maintaining files and databases to provide reports on program activities.

The budget amendment also provided funding for items for departments which will directly support program goals. This funding included: \$170,000 to provide an additional four (4) employee crew in the Drainage Division of Public Works to assist in drainage maintenance activities, \$500,000 to provide two (2) replacement residential garbage trucks and \$175,000 for one (1) replacement trash collection unit in the Solid Waste Division of Public Works.

The city's aesthetic appearance has taken a beating due to several severe storms in succession [Hurricane Rita, Hurricane Humberto, Hurricane Ike], which means the city has been mostly in recovery mode for the past several years. The city's appearance has also taken a beating due to citizens violating City codes regarding high grass, weeds, litter, junk motor vehicles and dilapidated structures.

The "One Block At A Time" Program takes aim at the problems created by the referenced circumstances. Area 1, the pilot area for the program, has the following boundaries: north - Thomas Blvd; south - Lakeshore Drive; east - Memorial Blvd.; west - Dequeen Blvd. It includes DeQueen Blvd. in its entirety. City forces from several departments were concentrated in this area to address numerous problems. The employees worked on clearing/cleaning curbs and gutters on city right-of-ways and streets, removing large trees and trash on city right-of-ways and streets, and identifying dilapidated structures for the City's demolition program.



A key element of the program is the commitment by the City to "raise its level of performance. Citizens attending the program's "roll out" meeting, leveled criticism at the City for the quality of work being performed by some employees in various departments. Critical remarks were made regarding the City's appearance of laxity with regard to code enforcement. Although the task is somewhat daunting, Lawrence Baker, Director of Building and Inspection Services, and his staff, have increased their efforts with regard to citing violators and eliminating code violations.

One section of the code which has been somewhat confusing to citizens is the law regarding parking of vehicles in front yards. The ordinance is not a new one, but is being enforced more vigorously. Citizens should know that it is NOT the intent of the City for individuals to remove gravel or shell driveways. However, the City does want to discourage individuals from parking on front lawns and sidewalks. Currently, the City is endeavoring to educate citizens regarding the ordinance, and will be doing a mass mailing regarding key City ordinances.

The City encourages citizens with information regarding potential violations in regards to illegal dumping, and other illegal code violations to contact the Building and Inspection Services Department at 409-983-8274. The department is actively working to change the city through control and elimination of code violations.

Another concern voiced during the program's "roll out" meeting was regarding law enforcement. Citizens were concerned that it appeared that law enforcement officers were ignoring violations in certain neighborhoods. Mark Blanton, Chief of Police, has indicated he understands the concerns of citizens and supports their desire for change. Although the department has made strides in reducing crime, the need for officers to take on "extra duty" jobs relative to the petro-chemical expansion increased surveillance activities relative to the terrorist threat, and to deal with emergency management functions have placed a strain on his force. During the last City Council meeting the City Council added an additional three (3) police officer positions.



The Public Works Department has faced mountains – literally – of debris as a direct result of the various storms and the aftermath as citizens and business endeavor to restore their structures. Each storm has required an exhaustive schedule for personnel and equipment in an effort to keep pace with the debris. The Department, led by John Comeaux, P. E. and Ross Blackketter, P. E., faces challenges on several fronts when it comes to maintaining the aesthetic outlook of the city. In addition to having to deal with commercial and green debris, the department must also attempt to keep ditches clean as they are a key part of the city's overall drainage system. Through the "One Block At A Time" Program, the department will be provided with additional equipment and personnel which will increase its ability to respond to needs of our citizens.



The City Council has set as one of its primary goals improving "quality of life" for citizens and visitors. As part of the "One Block At A Time" Program, the Parks and Recreation Department is actively engaged in attempting to improve the state of city parks and the appearance of city right-of-ways.

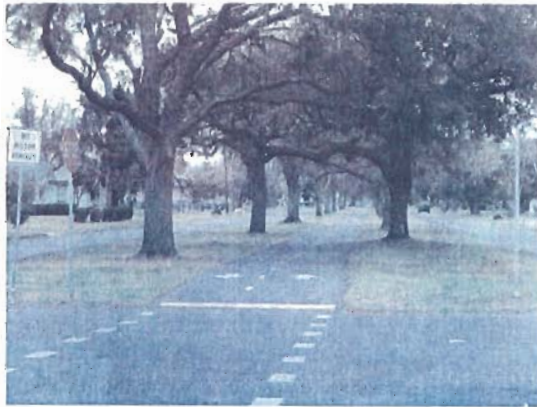


Dr. Albert T Thigpen, Interim Director of Parks and Recreation, points to the placing of new Playscape Systems, other new park equipment, and clearing of curbs as indicators that departmental staff are internalizing the department's "excellence" motto. The goal is to make the parks an enjoyable experience for persons of all ages and to make the City's right-of-ways and thoroughfares a source of city pride.



The "One Block At A Time" Program not only focuses on the cleaning and clearing of neighborhoods, but also on their restoration and stabilization. The City's Planning and Community Development Department with Ms. Colleen Russell as Director, and Ron Burton as Assistant Director, will play a pivotal role in the efforts to restore and stabilize neighborhoods. The Department will continue programs to build and renovate homes and will assist in efforts of other entities, such as the Port Arthur Housing Authority, Project SETIO/CWRC, Homes for Habitat, local Community Housing Development Organizations (CHDOs), private developers, etc.

The City, as part of the "One Block At A Time" program is preparing to either launch, or expand, several programs which will directly impact neighborhood restoration and stabilization. "Urban Land Banking", a program created under state law, allows a city to gather several pieces of property together for entities such as those mentioned previously to develop for new housing. The program accrues several advantages including: properties previously off the tax roll are returned thereto, properties which previously have been maintained at City (taxpayer) expense are maintained by owners, neighborhood property values are increased due to the placing of new structures, and neighborhood pride is increased as the neighborhood gains a more positive appearance.



The program's advantage to developers and others is the fact that the property can be acquired at minimal cost and often free of liens. The City works with the appropriate agencies to acquire property, establish ownership, and put together a program for proper transfer of the property to the acquiring entity. The net result of such a program is an increase in available housing stock, increase in property values and tax revenue.



Photo taken by OTRA Hispanic Media

The other pillar of the program's foundation is the involvement of citizens at the neighborhood level. As Mayor Prince has stated, "...the program cannot work without the volunteering and participation of everyone in the neighborhoods." In order for the program to be effective, it must truly function at the "people" level. People must decide that they want a better surrounding, a better environment, a better quality of life - and then act to make it happen. If each person will work to make their area better, then each neighborhood act to make itself better, then eventually we will have the city we long for.



Photo taken by OTRA Hispanic Media

The Mayor and City Council are excited about the high level of support the community has shown for the program. The large turn out at the program's formal launch, the high volume of calls received by the Mayor's office, and the high level of volunteerism is a clear sign that the community stands behind the program.

It is with a profound sense of duty and need, we set out to accomplish this objective, for we cannot afford to fail in this endeavor. Your Mayor and City Council are committed to this program, please join us in this effort.

Conclusion

The Mayor and City Council of Port Arthur plan to aggressively pursue the restoration and revitalization of neighborhoods by:

- Restoring a mindset of civic and neighborhood pride
- Effective code enforcement
- High standards of municipal performance
- Partnerships with other government entities
- Fostering an environment conducive to housing replacement and restoration
- Aiding citizens and neighborhoods in their efforts by linking people, finances, and resources to the goal

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