

GUEST COLUMN to the MONROE DISPATCH

For the Thursday, September 22, 2016 Edition

From: Mayor James E. "Jamie" Mayo

Join us to help Fight the Blight in Your Neighborhood

Fight the Blight is a simple concept. All residents of Monroe have the right to live in neighborhoods that are free from blighted conditions. That is the driving force behind new laws designed to reduce the number of eyesores created by vacant and/or dilapidated structures, junk cars, illegal dumping and overgrown lots. The Monroe City Council has a chance to finally adopt these new *Fight the Blight* laws, if passed at the Tuesday, September 27th council meeting. The new laws won't go into effect until January 2017...giving property owners three months to get things into compliance before being at any risk of being fined.

Some within the community are using well-dressed scare tactics to make people think the *Fight the Blight* laws are a bad thing. They are even putting pressure on council members to weaken or vote these laws down. However, the true culprits are those who are knowingly putting our property values at risk and making our neighborhoods look bad.

Let me tell you what this is not. This is NOT a "land grab". This is NOT gentrification. This is NOT designed to drive poor people out of their homes. *Fight the Blight* is an attempt to put some teeth into some very weak existing city laws as it relates to property upkeep. Simply put – we want laws in place that force people to keep their property clean and not adversely affect those people who own surrounding homes and businesses.

Too many neighborhoods are infected with eyesores. These neglected structures are unsafe for many reasons. Children can get hurt because they see buildings and lots as a place of adventure instead of danger. Criminals see them as a haven instead of a hazard. All while honest hard-working people suffer because property values decrease, accidents happen, and crimes take place because absentee landlords and property owners are not being held more accountable

In 2015, some former city council members led the charge to keep these *Fight the Blight* laws from being adopted into law. Since then, we took this plan directly to those affected. Members of my staff and our code enforcement officers joined me walking door-to-door and talking to hundreds of residents who want to see their neighborhoods clean. This past summer, our Green Team conducted a Community Mapping Project. They surveyed more than 10,500 properties throughout Monroe. Through the use of smart phones and GIS technology, it paints a picture of where the blight is and how severe it is throughout our city. Those maps were displayed at three public meetings where residents showed overwhelming support for this initiative. City Council members attended these meetings, in addition to giving input to the now proposed laws. The results of this project show that we currently have at least 2800 vacant lots (1400 of which are blighted). The survey also revealed 648 vacant houses (449 of which are blighted).

Because we lack strong enough laws, the responsibility of upkeep inevitably falls upon the City of Monroe. Which means the demolition and lot mowing is done at “tax-payer expense.” In the past seven years, we have demolished more than 400 structures and conducted several thousand lot mowings. As mayor, I don’t think it is right for us to have to use tax-payer dollars to care for private property. These negligent owners currently ignore any fines handed down by our Environmental court because our existing laws lack true bite. However, the new *Fight the Blight* laws would force all violators to quickly come into compliance by cleaning their property. If they fail to do so in a timely manner, they would face mandatory fines. If they still fail to comply, they would face the possibility of having liens added to their property taxes. This method has served as a deterrent to blight in other places. People would much rather clean their property than risk losing it.

Are you tired of seeing piles of debris around Monroe? Do you see houses and buildings that need to be demolished? Have you seen overgrown lots that need to be mowed or cleared? Do you think property owners should be held responsible for their property – or is this your responsibility as a taxpayer to pay for their mess? Please contact your city council member and let him or her know that you support the new *Fight the Blight* laws and its intent to help make all Monroe neighborhoods blight free.

By working together, we are making a difference. Monroe is one city, with one future!