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Planning official discusses code enforcement

By Reuben Mees

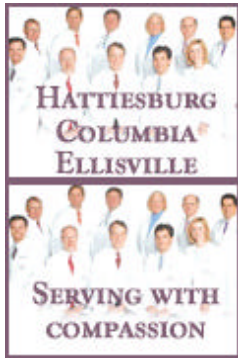
A strong proactive approach to land code enforcement is a key element in reducing crime and stimulating economic growth, a planning expert told Pine Belt municipal officials during a Wednesday planning workshop.

"The benefits of code enforcement run the gamut from creating a more livable city residents are proud to call home to the monetary," Hernando planning director and private consultant Bob Barber said during the session hosted by the University of Southern Mississippi's Business Assistance Center.

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"Code enforcement means lower insurance rates, higher property values and improves the investment climate, and code enforcement also relates to crime reduction," he said.

That piqued the interest of Historic North Main Street Neighborhood resident Johathan Cothorn, who attended the workshop to learn how his neighborhood association could deal with dilapidated housing.

"If it's something city officials didn't understand already, I hope they now realize that code enforcement directly affects economic development and crime statistics," Cothorn said. "Maybe we need to re-emphasize this grassroots approach. Like they say, treat the cause not the symptoms."

Prentiss Mayor Charlie Dumas, whose community has been troubled by drug activity and an unusually high 2006 murder rate in Jefferson Davis County, said he gathered some valuable information on addressing those issues.

"We've got some specific areas in our town that have needed addressing for some time," Dumas said. "Obviously there are good side effects to additional problems. Like Bob said, crime does gravitate to some of these areas."

Barber laid out strategies for communities to address problems but stressed the importance of setting goals and prioritizing projects that would accomplish those goals.

"There are a myriad of problems in any community and you can be overwhelmed by trying to address all the problems," he said.

In Hernando, he said, the city focuses on absentee landlords who allow their property to fall into disrepair and tries to deal with high-visibility cases on a priority basis.

"We are all over absentee landlords because the way I look at it it's a crime for them to live somewhere else and take money from the community and have a dilapidated property," he said.

But the high-visibility projects not only get city officials credit for addressing a problem but also let people with similar violations

know that they could be targeted next.

"The city does look like the good guy, but it is not enforced so the city looks good, but because when people see it, they get the message," Barber said.

He also said good techniques include establishing a strong working relationship with the judge who hears code violation cases, making one employee a point person for dealing with code issues in small cities and dealing with people in a polite and courteous manner to get the best results.




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