

February 27, 2023 Southside Neighborhood Meeting

Martinsville City Council toured the Southside area on February 27, 2023 beginning at 5:30pm. Those present for the tour were LC Jones, Kathy Lawson, Chad Martin, Tammy Pearson, Building Inspector Mark Price, Inspector Luis Rosas, Police Chief Rob Fincher, Officer Coretha Gravely, Martinsville Bulletin Reporter Bill Wyatt, and Mike Sanguadolche of the Transportation Committee

The tour began at 5:30 from the rear of the City Municipal Building and traveled to Bridge Street, Market Street, Broad Street, Aaron Street, Starling Avenue, south on Memorial Boulevard to Oakgrove Avenue, Ranson Road, and Ivy Street. The tour continued south on Memorial Boulevard to DuPont Road, turning on South Askin then to Knowles Street, and back to Union Street. The tour returned to Askin Street then looped through Oak Street where attendees briefly discussed a former City park at the end of that street. The tour resumed to Graves Street, South Street, Park Street, Wingfield Street, Roy Street, Ellwood Street, then back out to Memorial Boulevard. The tour continued to Starling Avenue, Forest Street, Childress Drive, Smith Lake Road to Village Street, back to Forest Street, Starling Avenue East, Virginia Street, Aaron Street to College and Roanoke Street, then to Maple Street. The tour concluded at the Municipal Building at approximately 6:30 pm. Along the route, attendees noticed a number of properties needing attention such as property maintenance issues, abandoned houses, etc. In practically every case, Mark Price noted the property had already been posted. If demolition of the property is expected, it was noted that the City is already working through that process. Attendees noticed several locations where houses had already been removed. If there was a noted property maintenance issue, it was shared that most all of those locations had already been turned over to Public Works for handling. Attendees observed significant storage of vehicles and equipment next to the street on Childress but noted that progress has been made in cleaning that up. Overall, most areas were clean. Houses or properties observed as possible code violations were indicated to already be in the system.

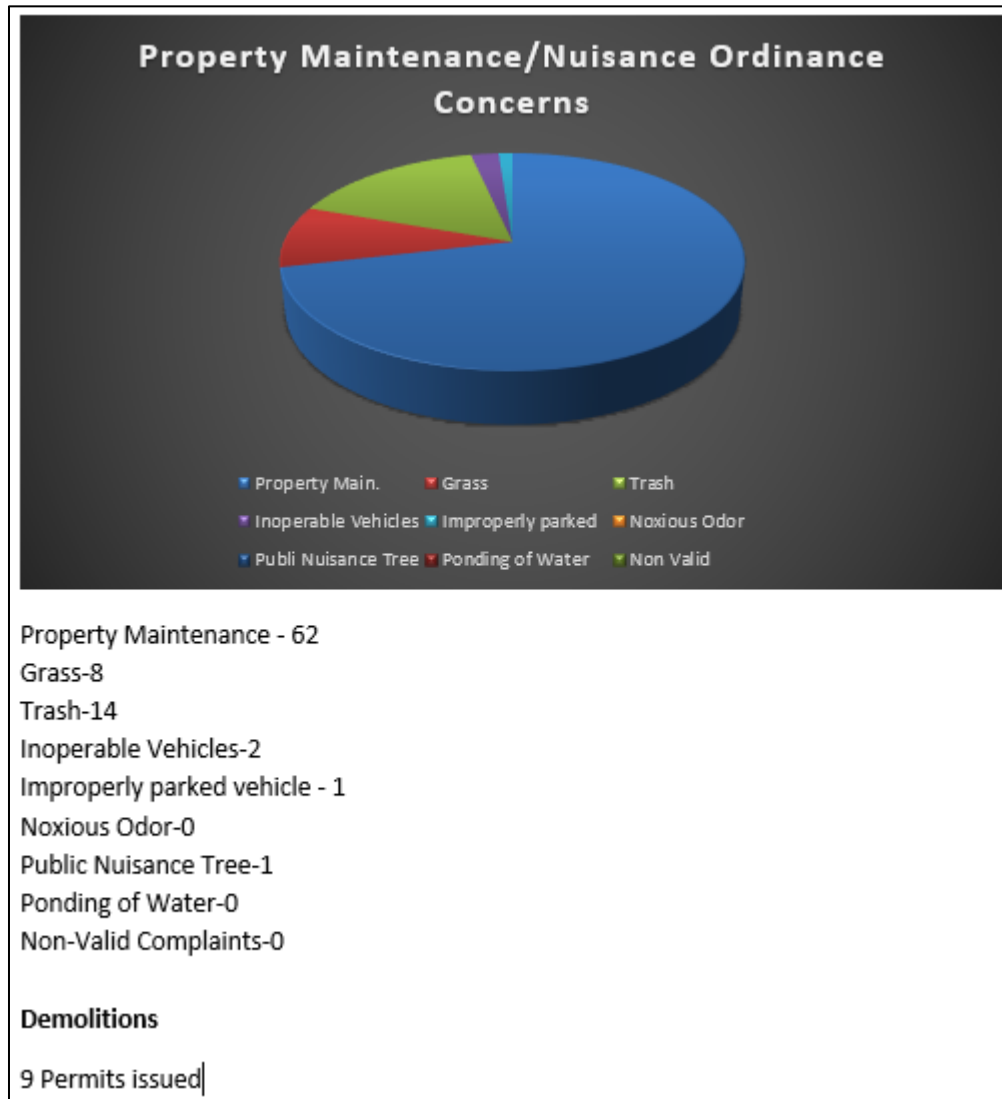
Neighborhood Meeting, Monday, 7:00 pm, Wesley Memorial Methodist Church Auditorium, 824 Starling Avenue – Those who attended the neighborhood tour were present for the meeting along with Vice Mayor Aaron Rawls, Clerk of Council Karen Roberts, Public Information Officer Kendall Davis, Building Inspector Kris Bridges, and Deputy Police Chief Chad Rhoads. Approximately 20 residents from the area attended.

Mayor Jones opened the meeting at 7:00pm and welcomed attendees. Pastor Chris Bennett offered invocation.

Mayor Jones called on City Manager Towarnicki to summarize the neighborhood tour from earlier in the evening and to also review issues brought up at the previous Southside neighborhood meeting November 14, 2022.

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Inspector Luis Rosas summarized the property maintenance report, stating that the Community Development office works diligently to address all resident concerns and shared contact information and the location of the office.



Police Chief Rob Fincher updated residents on the crime report in Southside area and introduced several members of his staff. From January 2022 to January 2023, there was a 21% decrease in crime in the Southside area with assaults being at the top of the list. Fincher encouraged residents to always lock their doors as a precaution, sharing that there was one burglary report this past month. Sgt. Jeremy Purvis and additional officers will be working the Southside area specifically and if they see a crime “trend” then Purvis will alert the Police Department and request additional resources. Council Member Pearson mentioned a house on Oak Grove that is a reported drug house. Fincher explained that the Police Department is monitoring that location with hidden cameras and shared that there are additional traffic cameras in the area as part of Operation Bold Blue Line.

Jane Martin of Oak Grove Avenue asked if the owners of the abandoned cars on Oak Grove are paying taxes on those vehicles. Mayor Jones said they would look into that.

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Norman Murphy of Oak Grove Avenue said there are 21 untagged vehicles behind the jewelry store at Oak Grove and Memorial Avenue and some of those cars have been on jacks for over four years. That intersection is one of the first impressions of the City when visitors come to Martinsville from the south. You can only make that first impression once. There are multiple vehicles there with no tags and Murphy feels that they are running an illegal outdoor garage.

Gaila Fox who lives at the corner of Park Street and Wingfield expressed concern about the fire hydrant at her home which has had a bag over it for quite some time. Public Works told her that they were looking into that and that it would be back in order soon. City Manager Towarnicki said that he would look into that. Fox said she lived in New York for 20 years and that she feels very safe in Martinsville. Fox appreciates the Police Department and the work that they do and stated that she has never felt threatened since living here. She said the local officers are "good guys" and she appreciates their professional manner.

Betty Cannady of Park Street is concerned about the water and about abandoned houses in the area; she believes homeless people are staying in them and there is a lot of broken glass in the homes and on the road. Cannaday said it would be nice if the school art department would paint a mural on the wall at Hardees to cover the graffiti. She had a lot of items stolen when she first moved to her home but she's thankful for the Police Department's help to make that a safer place. She would like the Police Department to control traffic on Park Street, especially on the weekends because there is a lot of traffic during late hours. She also expressed concern about Coyotes which are becoming a problem and asked what could be done. Fincher stated that coyotes are classified as wildlife and a nuisance animal through the Department of Wildlife Game and Inland Fisheries but within the city, there are not many clear areas to trap or shoot them. One way to keep coyotes out of the area is to decrease the food source, including any food left outside for dogs and cats that can attract coyotes. Coyotes rarely mess with humans, they go after small prey like cats and small dogs. Vice Mayor Aaron Rawls says it sounds like a horror movie to be woken up by a pack of coyotes in the night. Rawls said traffic is one of the top concerns in most areas in the city, he would love to see the Police Department crackdown on traffic issues. Rawls shared that Council is working on a committee to aggressively focus on dilapidated properties in the City.

Jane Martin said that 1203 Oak Grove is abandoned and looks ok from the street but there are multiple appliances in the back yard. At 1219 Oak Grove, there is a shed made out of pallets to hide a wrecked car. She expressed concern about two huskies that are pinned in the back porch of a house in that area. Martin says that she is tired of complaining and nothing being done. She's been reporting these issues since 2021 with no results. Norman Murphy said that there are laws on the books and he doesn't understand why those laws aren't enforced. There is no need for new laws, the City should just enforce the ones we already have. Murphy said that younger people are pet obsessed, if they don't like what they see in the City regulations

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to protect a pet, then they shouldn't move to the city. Murphy said there are two dogs on Ranson Road that are tethered 24 hours a day every day. Fincher said some of his officers have donated some of their own money to help this dog owner become compliant with his dogs, he has medical issues but he loves his dogs and the way he is tending to the dogs is compliant. Murphy disagreed with Chief Fincher, stating that the dogs are not being taken care of and that the owner is breeding them.

Gaila Fox questioned the train that comes by her home and asked what those trains carry; Fox expressed concerns about a potential train derailment and the release of toxic chemicals referencing the recent derailment in Palestine, Ohio. Council Member Lawson said that most of the trains passing through our area carry coal and not hazardous materials. Council Member Martin said that the DEQ monitors the contents that are loaded on those trains until they are unloaded. Fox said that there are so many people who live in the area who don't realize that there are funds and grants available to residents to repair homes. She has taken advantage of three grants in the 21 years she's lived here.

Sonny Farmer of Pace Street said that the trains that travel behind his house don't carry coal, they are pulling tankers. Farmer said that FedEx and UPS trucks speed in his area and do not obey traffic laws. Vice Mayor Rawls said experienced UPS/FedEx drivers are trained better than that and that those driver's Farmer is seeing are probably contract drivers.

Dawn Taylor of Belmont Street shared that the trains with tankers are carrying materials to the industrial park related to their operations. There are a lot of cars parked on Belmont Street; it can be a hazardous area when FedEx and UPS trucks are speeding and the visibility is limited at the intersection.

Norman Murphy asked why the City doesn't identify abandoned houses and contact the owner to encourage them to either sell or flip that property before it becomes too far gone to rehabilitate or gets added to the demolition list. Building Inspector Kris Bridges explained the policy of most municipalities is not to be involved in the land development business and that the city does not have the resources to track down the owners, encourage them to sell, etc. When they contact owners about property demolition, sometimes they don't respond for a year or longer which only increases the cost to the property owner. Bridges explained that many homes could be purchased for rehabilitation but they may have extensive liens that would need to be handled before the property transfer process so it may not be economically feasible for developers.

Mayor Jones said they are working on a Community Advisory Board that will address concerns about abandoned and dilapidated homes and a solution to get those issues resolved. Galia Fox said if the city is going to share information, she recommends sending it to Star News since that's what local people watch instead of disbursing information in ways people won't read. Residents learn these things through word of mouth.

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Mike Sanguadolche of Starling Avenue said he bought a house on Wilson Street that was abandoned by going through the City GIS tax maps. A good neighbor is a nosey neighbor, if we see a house that is abandoned and needs work, someone should contact the owner through GIS or contact someone who buys houses. Anyone needing smoke detectors should contact the Red Cross or the Martinsville Fire Department. Sanguadolche recently joined the Transportation Safety Committee and he is reaching out to other people to serve on the committee with him so they can make a difference in the City. He's still learning what the committee can do and if they have a voice with VDOT in Richmond but he hopes to make a difference. People have one chance at a first impression. He hopes the Transportation Safety Committee is transparent and up-front in the public eye.

Kendall Davis provided information on smoke alarm installation which can be found on the City website and said that he would be happy to assist anyone with accessing the website. Council Member Martin suggested sharing flyers with important information with barber shops, doctor's offices, and churches since not everyone has access to the website.

Vice Mayor Rawls said Council has been meeting regularly to discuss concerns. The City needs people who will step up to help and serve on City boards and commissions to make a difference.

Mayor Jones thanked residents for coming out and encouraged them to reach out to inspections, animal control, the police department, and property maintenance as well as the neighborhood watch members and Council Members.

The meeting adjourned at 8:10pm.

Karen Roberts
Clerk of Council

LC Jones
Mayor