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Another cleanup for problem property

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Armed with gas powered string-trimmers, shovels, rakes and machetes, a group of about 20 church volunteers waded into a jungle of hip-high vegetation behind an abandoned house here Saturday morning.

In a matter of hours, the tangled mass of vines, tree limbs and overgrown grass was reduced to a clear backyard.

It was the fourth such cleanup in the past year at the vacant property adjacent to the St. Anthony of Padua Church and school on River Road in Cramer Hill.

Members of St. Anthony of Padua and the Camden Churches Organized for People, a confederation of area churches, want more than to just see the grass mowed on the vacant property, however, as they have been lobbying city officials to hand over the discarded lot.

"Many people have told us it can't be done but I think it would be a real win-win situation," said Father William "Jud" Weiksnar, pastor of St. Anthony.

In the past 2 1/2 years since the property owner died and the property was abandoned, vandals have broken in numerous times. The house has been used for drug trade and the thick vegetation in the backyard has served as a potential hideout for sexual predators, Weiksnar said.

During that time, church leaders have petitioned to have the land turned over to their care so they can tear down the home and potentially build a small gymnasium and auditorium on the property.

However, Weiksnar said city officials have told them a tax lien of about \$25,000 on the property stands in their way.

Weiksnar said the church can't afford to front the money and potential donors are hesitant to offer funds to pay off a tax lien.

According to Weiksnar, Camden public works officials have boarded up the dilapidated blue-shingle home three different times, but have said it is not in such disrepair that emergency demolition is necessary.

There are visible holes in the roof of the two-story home and the shingle siding is tearing off in patches.

In a three-month span, Weiksnar said he picked up 60 drug bags and vials on the sidewalk around the property, which is across the road from a park and playing fields.

On Saturday, St. Anthony youth pastor Mandi Aviles found another drug bag lying among the cleared weeds.

"We would really like to see the church turn this into something positive for the kids," Aviles said. "It's something negative for them now, so we would like to give them some hope and say, 'Hey we can give you change.'"

Aviles said Camden police have warned church officials about the vacant property, which is around 20 feet from the closest school building at the church, and its potential to serve as a hideout for predators.

This was a part of the motivation that got 15-year-old Angel Ramos out of bed Saturday morning to do his part in helping clean the property up.

Angel, a member of the church's youth group, said he didn't want to see younger kids get hurt walking around the property.

Aside from being adjacent to the property, Weiksnar said another tie exists as the former owner told church officials they were to receive the property after his death.

Still, the church has been left to only clean up the property in the last years, he said.

Weiksnar, however, isn't giving up as he envisions a small gymnasium named "Ron's House," in honor of the property's late owner, one day standing where volunteers cleared out vegetation on Saturday.

"I'm saying 'when' not 'if,'" Weiksnar said.

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