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Oakwood looking to spruce up appearance



Oakwood is trying to spruce up its physical appearance from its tiny downtown to the cluster of strip shopping centers and fast-food restaurants along Mundy Mill Road.

“We’re just (trying) to make the right of way look better — mowing, litter control, trash pickup, that kind of thing,” City Manager Stan Brown said. “And then ... we’ve tried to cut down on the number of banners and roadside advertising signs we were seeing.”

Once a month, city officials — including public works — do a monthly check of properties “with a very critical eye in terms of appearance and things that are obvious code violations or things that we, as a city, need to maintain better,” Brown said.

The city also has compiled a list of abandoned or dilapidated buildings, which features a variety of properties, including houses and commercial structures.

Several of the property owners either couldn’t be reached or declined comment.

“We’ve a got a few buildings of our own that we’ve issued demolition permits to ourselves,” Brown said.

“It’s not appropriate for us to be superaggressive with private property owners when we’ve got two or three structures on city-owned property that need to be addressed as well.

“We’re going to try to set the example there this winter, when we get out of the mowing season.”

The city defines an abandoned structure as any “forsaken or deserted building” and a dilapidated one as having “fallen into partial ruin or decay, as from age, misuse, wear or neglect.”

Part of the program involves violation notices and citations, but the city first hopes to meet with owners about resolving issues, setting up an action plan with deadlines and following up on the “progress of compliance,” a city document states.

Another option is to forge a public-private agreement in which the city would work with the owner to market the property and otherwise “make the property more desirable to market.”

The city has adopted building and design standards for a vast area spanning most of the city, particularly along the four-lane, heavily commercial Mundy Mill Road between McEver Road and Ga. 13/Atlanta Highway.

Several new businesses have cropped up in recent years adhering to those standards, including a Steak ‘n Shake restaurant off Thurmon Tanner Parkway. A Captain D’s seafood restaurant is set to open Monday on Thurmon Tanner, across from Steak ‘n Shake.

Also, fast-food rivals Burger King and McDonald’s have rebuilt on their respective properties.

The City Council voted in September to adopt an urban redevelopment plan and apply to the Georgia Department of Community Affairs for the designation of certain blighted areas as an opportunity zone.

An opportunity zone is an area that can be designated by a government body to qualify for tax breaks for development efforts.

“I strongly recommend we adopt this due to our footprint for redevelopment,” Mayor Lamar Scroggs said at the time. “Redevelopment brings jobs and industry to the city of Oakwood.”

City officials had to produce a redevelopment plan before they could apply for the designation, which would allow for a \$3,500 tax credit for each new job created to companies that locate in the zone.

Oakwood’s proposed opportunity zone features 104 parcels on 416 acres across the city, including around Mundy Mill near Interstate 985 and McEver Road at Flat Creek Road.

“I think we’re on the rise,” Brown said. “We’re seeing things reshape on Mundy Mill Road. ... We’re not there yet, we’ve got a ways to go, but these (initiatives) are good, positive steps, and it’s going to be an ongoing thing.”

Robb Owens of Gainesville-based Owens Management Group said he is trying to help improve a neighborhood where one of the properties is on the city’s list — and that’s become a chore, as there are several owners involved.

“You need to fix all of the (housing units) to improve the look of each one individually,” he said.

Still, he believes the city’s program, as a whole, will improve Oakwood’s look overall.

“Oakwood has so much to offer, from retail ... to proximity to other places, and just a few bad apples are making it look bad,” Owens said.

“This effort could make the whole town look better.”