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News Release

Town hall meeting on beautification held Monday at Senior Center

Officials, organizations, citizens brainstorm ideas for helping out other people

ARKANSAS CITY, Kan. (October 18, 2016) — About 30 citizens and city commissioners attended a special town hall meeting Monday night to discuss beautification and code enforcement in Ark City.

The meeting, conducted by the City of Arkansas City, was held at the Arkansas City Senior Citizens Center, 320 South A St. It had been rescheduled from Oct. 6 due to inclement weather.

Commissioners in attendance were Mayor Duane Oestmann, Charles Tweedy, Jay Warren and Karen Welch. Beautification and Tree Advisory Board members present were Bob Foster, Peggy Soule, Candace Stephens and Jill Wineinger.

Organizations represented included the City, Angels in the Attic, the Arkansas City Area Chamber of Commerce, Ark City Arts, the Arkansas City Police Department, the Beautification Board, Church of the Nazarene, Cowley College's ACES program, the Optimist Club, the Rotary Club and the Soroptimists.

The meeting began with a PowerPoint presentation by City Manager Nick Hernandez. He talked about the "three Ps" of developing a community — people, performance and purpose.

People are the most important component of developing pride in a community, he said. He urged everyone in attendance to have a common vision and work to create something to improve people's lives.

Hernandez praised those in the audience for coming together for the common purpose of brainstorming solutions for people who are not able to trim their trees or pick up trash in their yard.

"The City can bark all day long," he said. "We can enforce codes. We can force people to paint their houses, fix their roofs, mow their grass, whatever it may be, but that isn't exactly helping our neighbors."

He mentioned how some citizens do not have lawnmowers — he once saw a person trying to cut grass with a pair of scissors — cannot afford paint, or do not have the means or the skills for upkeep.

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If the City does something to help, Hernandez said, it has to perform and show there is value to what it is doing in the community. It doesn't do any good to write tickets and not change the mindset, he said.

He also said citizens who care face a lot of negativity and apathy in the community. But for those who don't understand or don't care about this effort, he said, the code enforcement process comes into play.

Hernandez said an average of 350 to 400 code enforcement cases are filed each year by the City.

The majority of those cases are for tall grass and weeds, tree trimming, and junk and debris.

Structural and building concerns represent a small part of that average, as well.

"I think (opening cases is) the last thing that we absolutely want to do," Hernandez said. "We (first) must look for the goodness in each of the people that are around us, the good our neighbor has to offer."

He said many citizens who receive tall grass letters want to mow their yards — they just can't afford a mower or the gasoline. Others have the money, but not the free time or the physical ability to mow.

Hernandez floated the idea of a lawnmower checkout program, in which citizens could sign a waiver, check out a mower from the City parks shop, use it and bring it back for someone else to use.

"That's sad," he said of his scissors example. "We need to be able to help those individuals."

Hernandez said Arkansas City needs to move from a "me-centric" culture to a "we-centric" culture.

"We need to think about everyone who comes to us for help," he explained.

"(We need to) treat them like it's your daughter being married: It's her wedding day, she's the most important thing for the day, and you need to take care of her and treat her as such."

He said everyone can donate something, whether it is their time as a volunteer; their talents, such as carpentry or gardening; or their treasure, in the form of contributing funds to buy whatever is needed.

One area that came to light during the meeting is the need for some pickup trucks. Some people may be able to move trash or limbs to their curb, but have no way to transport it from there, Hernandez said.

Several citizens volunteered the use of their trucks or knew of someone who is willing to loan theirs.

Public Information Officer Andrew Lawson demonstrated a new online reporting tool that will launch soon on the City's website. City officials hope it will improve transparency in the complaint process and help citizens to understand how their concerns are progressing in the cleanup or enforcement stages.

Then attendees broke up into four roundtable discussions to brainstorm ideas and solutions. The consensus of the groups after about 10 to 15 minutes of discussion was the need for:

- Some kind of list for people or groups who “on call” to assist those who need help, whether in the form of trucks, labor or other resources.
- Similarly, an updated, screened list of people or properties that need assistance or upkeep.
- “Adopt-a-block” cleanup events that take care of many properties in one day or weekend.
- Micro-grants from the City and local nonprofit organizations to assist with beautification.
- Encouraging youth volunteerism, summer volunteer labor and citizen neighborliness.
- Communicating these resources to those who need them by way of “low-tech” fliers and a “hotline” telephone number to call for assistance on any official letters the City sends out.
- Investigating the possibility of corporate sponsorships for beautification and cleanup efforts.
- A positive marketing campaign to raise awareness and increase community pride.

“The Ark City that I see has so much potential,” Hernandez said near the end of Monday’s meeting.

“It’s a beautiful place. There are wonderful people in Ark City. The problem is we kind of have an inferiority complex, like we aren’t good enough. We just have to remind people that we are (good enough), and remind them of what’s good about Ark City and why we live here:

“Towns would die for the hike-bike trails that we have. Communities would just bend over backwards to have the access to rivers that we have. We have a lot of church- and civic-minded people in Ark City. We have a lot of good hearts and tremendous people.”

More discussions will take place between city staff, organizations and citizens as an outgrowth of the ideas developed at the town hall meeting. An email list is being developed to further those discussions.

Citizens who are interested in being added to that list or who represent an organization that wants to be involved in this process may contact Lawson at (620) 441-4415 or alawson@arkansascityks.gov.

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