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CITY CRACKS DOWN ON JUNK HEAPS//HOMEOWNERS ORDERED TO CLEAN UP OR FACE FINES

Move that junk car off the lawn, Jethro. And the rusty boat trailer. And those old tires. Forest Lake says it's not letting folks use yards as storage sheds anymore.

After watching complaints over "junk yards" grow over the last four years, the city has begun cracking down. It's passing out more citations, and city crews are ready to clean the worst yards and bill property owners for the work.

The moves, city officials say, are a push to beautify the community and calm residents fed up with eyesores on their blocks.

A junk heap "affects the character of the community," Community Development Director Doug Borglund said. "People remember those things as they drive through."

For years, the city has been fairly laid-back about yard messes. Some homeowners have let grass and weeds grow a foot tall and have littered lawns with junked cars, boats and auto parts -- not to mention farm animals.

The clutter can attract rodents. And neighbors often complain that junk heaps hurt property values nearby -- which can lead to some ugly disputes.

In the past, police occasionally have cited property owners, and the city has sent the odd warning letter. But the problem has grown with the city. Forest Lake officials now handle 20 to 25 complaints a week -- double the number it received when Borglund started working for the city in 2002.

This year, Borglund said, the city has begun to work with police "to respond to every complaint."

Most of the time, it's just a matter of informing homeowners that what they're doing is illegal, and Borglund said that usually solves the problem. City officials also send a letter to make an official record of the matter and might take photos of the property.

But earlier this month, they issued police citations and City Council resolutions to four homeowners -- a first for Borglund since he's been here.

Mayor Terry Smith called it "the first push. I can imagine there will be more. It takes time to do this."

A citation orders a homeowner to clean things up or appear in court, where a judge will determine what to do, Borglund said.

A violation could be charged as a misdemeanor punishable by up to 90 days in jail or a fine of up to \$1,000. But Borglund said the aim isn't to punish homeowners -- just to get them to clean up.

The council resolutions enable city workers to clean up the messes and then bill the homeowners for it. Payment, Borglund said, comes out of owners' property assessments.

Homeowner William O'Brien is taking it in stride. The 67-year-old was one of the four

targeted by the city this month. But he said it's just another predictable chapter in a 35-year history.

The amateur fix-it man and admitted packrat said he sometimes crams four or five vehicles in his front driveway and up to half a dozen in the back. His corner lot on Fourth Street has housed, among other things, bicycles, lawn mowers, snowmobiles and even a fish house.

Every other year city officials send him a letter, he said, and he eventually cleans things up.

"Stuff is gone, and it looks good for a couple of years, but ... things build up again," he said.

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