

By Ralph Zahorik
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Taskforce On Waukegan Neighborhoods, the most dynamic citizen action group the city has seen in years, is taking a new direction after spending the last 12 years battling blight and, often, City Hall.

"We feel the field is ripe for some real economic development in Waukegan," said Newton Finn, a lawyer, Baptist minister, former mayoral candidate and founder and president of the group.

TOWN is working now to develop partnerships with businesses, non-profit development organizations and the city, he said.

Waukegan Mayor Richard Hyde said he was unaware of TOWN's new initiative but that he welcomes it. "I said years ago we've got to stop scrappin' and start working together," he said. "I'm for it (partnering TOWN) 100 percent. I'm pleased they saw the light. They can't do it themselves. This city is bigger than anyone.

"The city is doing a lot but there's enough work for everybody to be involved," Finn said. "We feel Waukegan is ripe to make a major move beyond the Genesee Theatre and the lakefront. We want a citywide plan to bring back health and prosperity to Waukegan. We want to do all we can do to make Waukegan more viable, prosperous and appealing."

The city has been focusing most of its efforts in three areas — the Genesee Theatre in downtown Waukegan, the lakefront and Fountain Square, the former Lakehurst Mall on the west side, Finn said.

Major corridors like Lewis Avenue, Green Bay Road, Washington Street, Grand Avenue and 10th Street — and neighborhoods — have been neglected, he contended.

"We have the Genesee Theatre and there's been a lot of talk about the downtown and the lakefront but there's precious little to show for it," Finn said. "Who knows when the lakefront is going to pop? We need a plan for the corridors and our neighborhoods where these beautiful older homes are."

An untold story about Waukegan, Finn said, is the stream of people moving in to buy and restore older homes in the city's neighborhoods. "There's been a trickle of people coming in to rehab old homes and convert two-flats into single-family homes," he said. "Ramshackle homes I drove by 20 years ago look good today."

TOWN and Finn have cleaned up scores of neighborhood eyesores themselves. The group, using a state law that



Tony Skerbec of Waukegan (left), a WaukTOWN radio engineer, and Joan Hammel of Wildwood, host of "Joan Hammel and Friends."

allows citizens to go to court to force owners to clean up rundown property, has filed more than 150 lawsuits against slumlords and owners who haven't kept up their properties over the past decade, mostly in Waukegan but also in North Chicago and Beach Park.

Most of the actions have resulted in cleanup settlements or court-ordered cleanups and demolitions.

About 60 lawsuits were filed in 2003, 2004 and 2005.

The old Grand Avenue Lumber yard at 1213 Grand Ave., vacant for nearly 10 years, was targeted by TOWN in 2003. Buildings were starting to collapse. Rubbish was piling up. People were hanging out in abandoned structures. The owner declined a settlement so TOWN went to court and the owner demolished the buildings.

The outcome was typical of dozens of TOWN cases.

"When TOWN closes the cases in its latest round of litigation, the majority of blighted and nuisance properties in Waukegan will have been ad-

dress," states a recently released TOWN "Prospectus."

"We've been blight-busting for 12 years," Finn said. "Now it's time to move on. TOWN has a wonderful group of volunteers, a lot of energy and some great ideas ... We intend to bring that to the table."

Waukegan, a city of 90,000 people, has no movie theatres, no downtown hotels or motels, no bookstores, few new car dealerships and "only a few restaurants that offer more than grills or fast food," Finn noted.

"The time has come to 'sell' a new and better Waukegan to entrepreneurs as a promising place to plant businesses, to provide support ... to retain quality businesses and to increase the flow of urban pioneers to reclaim and restore our older neighborhoods, the TOWN Prospectus states.

Finn said TOWN is working on a partnership with "one of the community groups in the nation."

TOWN's Web site, waukegan.org,

will be used to promote and market Waukegan, Finn said. The site already includes information on Waukegan, along with an online radio station, WaukTOWN, and a popular forum.

The site currently is getting 200,000 "hits" a week, mostly on the forums, said Frank Alviani, a webmaster and TOWN vice-chair. WaukTOWN radio gets 700 to 1,000 listeners a month, he said.

Although volunteers will be an important part of the new campaign, "it can't be done on a purely volunteer basis," Finn said. "This is going to a whole new level of effort. It's going to require considerable fund raising. We'll need professional staff."

TOWN might be taking a new direction but the lawsuits aren't expected to end. Among the group's new targets are paved-over or graveled-over back yards of single-family homes and two-flats. It isn't uncommon in Waukegan for owners of buildings that have been illegally cut up into multiple units to pave yards for

tenant parking, generally a violation of city law.

Two such suits against owners of buildings at 633 and 631 N. County St. are pending.

"We're going after illegally paved-over yards with a vengeance," Finn said. "We're calling it the Return of the Back Yards."

TOWN is also continuing to monitor Waukegan's ravine system, Finn said. Two ravine cleanup suits were filed in 2004. In one case, a ravine was cleaned up by the owner. In the second case, the property was sold to the city and cleaned up, Finn said.

Finn made two runs for Waukegan mayor and came within an eyelash of winning both times. He said he has no intention of seeking the office again. "There's no political agenda here," he said. "I don't intend to enter the political arena ... Whatever contributions I make to the city will be through the TOWN organization ... I'm not going to run for mayor."