

Guest Column: Blight is taking over the landscape

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What's the answer for blight?

Del Norte is truly a beautiful county... in most places. Does Del Norte County possess some of the most awesome redwood forests and magnificent coastline and beach seascapes on the North American continent? Yes. But there are certainly no shortages of eyesore blighted properties spewed about in every district in Del Norte County.

Human-created blight has and continues to be a major sore spot. All candidates for the three county supervisor district races have acknowledged the blight issue, but in their campaign rhetoric none have offered any solutions.

Just how does one grab a handle on blight and propose to clean up and keep maintained theses ugly messes some folks have irresponsibly created? Lots of chatter, a whole lot of finger-pointing, very little engagement on this growing disregard and recognition on the appearance of landscape ugliness in Del Norte County.

Government is not the answer. We cannot expect government to solve this growing problem of blight. Solutions to address blight are expensive and money-centered, and tediously slow in resolution. I'm sad to say, the community is not winning the battle against blight.

Truth be told, there will never be enough public funds to satiate the desire of some to "clean up the mess" for those who do not share this viewpoint.

Our Del Norte County Dept. of Community Development oversees Code Enforcement with a two-person team; the second employee was recently hired. Here are the essentials you need to know:

- The current County caseload is about 150 active cases; 95 percent are blight-related and directly caused by our fellow human beings.
- "Blight Court" meets monthly and is the venue where code violations and nuisances are addressed.

Blight Court is not a criminal court. The impartial hearing officer has three options available to mitigate blight: 1) Declare that the blight that is the subject of the complaint is not a nuisance; 2) Declare the blight is a nuisance; and 3) If so declared, the hearing officer may then give the offender a reasonable time to correct the violation, or refer the violation back to Code Enforcement for remediation.

Penalties vary from imposing the requirement to correct the violation, and recordation of a lien against the property and its owners if Code Enforcement undertakes the cleanup, often a very expensive proposition. Such liens will encumber the property until the lien is satisfied, often when the property is sold, or the property owner refinances a mortgage loan or seeks a secondary loan.

Low Divide Road, north of the Smith River between Highway 101 and Highway 199, is a long-standing illegal dump location, and is currently the site of eight separate Code Enforcement cases. The wheels of government move slowly.

Certainly, there are no shortages of other eyesore properties in the County. For the most part, despite its long history, blight abatement is not a County priority. The Board of Supervisors has been AWOL in prioritizing and addressing the blight problem. The County is losing the battle to contain blight.

Allow me to be crystal-clear. The current and very dedicated Code Enforcement team is simply overwhelmed by an ever-growing population of folks who live in the bushes adjacent to businesses, and who continue to inappropriately dispose of trash, clothes and other debris.

Drug abusers, alcoholics, mentally ill and others who live this vagabond lifestyle, urinate and defecate in the bushes that hide their misdeeds from public purview. The Dept. of Health and Human Services, with its seemingly bottomless pit budget, is unable or unwilling to control those who besmirch our pristine geography, and who continue this unhealthy, unhygienic behavior.

DHHS hides behind its excuse-driven Constitutional restriction to stop those who act in this anti-social and law-violating manner.

The City of Crescent also suffers and turns an astigmatic, sight-challenged eye to its blight issues. In the City's case, overgrown weeds permeate from the sidewalks, curbs and four feet into the street. There is Ordinance (8.08.020) to enforce the mitigation of unsightly / overgrown weeds in front of private property but the City fails to address this beautification ordinance. These violations reflect poorly on our community and are in stark contrast to the magnificence of our area.

The answer to maintaining the pristine appearance of our community is the following:

- The County and City must enforce existing State littering and trash dumping laws already on the books in the City, County and State.
- The California Highway Patrol, Del Norte County Sheriff's Dept., Dept. of Fish and Wildlife, and State and National Parks law enforcement officers must step up enforcement by issuing citations for those who litter and foul our environment. If fines are indeed punitive, bad behavior will stop.
- And the most important, vital component for blight abatement is to embrace and recognize volunteer efforts. City and County expression of official appreciation for those those who give of their time, tools and talent which foments more community involvement.

Volunteers from Take a Bite out of Blight, Pride in Community, Smith River Alliance and many independent individual efforts provide enormous support at zero cost to the taxpayer.

I know of one community hero who assumes responsibility in removing unsightly trash from the corner of Washington and Summer Lane, across the street from Walmart. Anonymously, she cleans up the trash, I have seen it several times, and I now commend and recognize this community hero.

Roll up your sleeves and get involved. Volunteer to help clean up this place we all call home.

Sadly, our elected leaders can do much more to bring awareness to discarded couches and other undesirable items that have been abandoned on vacant parcels by irresponsible property owners and tenants who care little about the properties they own or lease, or the neighborhoods in which they live.

When I served on the Board of Supervisors, I spent no shortage of time cruising the streets looking for dumped trash, abandoned vehicles, shopping carts, discarded furniture and fresh graffiti vandalism.

I regret to say that now, in District 1, Supervisor Darrin Short apparently does not share my passion to clean up the district he represents. Without indicating "depraved indifference" associated with Mr. Short or any of the other county supervisors, I feel confident in my statement that addressing this problem is a low priority for the Board of Supervisors.

I do not observe Supervisors Hemmingsen, Howard or Masten scouring their respective districts where blight thrives. There is no "See Something, Say Something" to embrace community support and empower city and county residents to abate these intolerable conditions. To its credit, the City has a complaint-driven website which is, nevertheless, painfully slow in addressing long-standing blight issues.

My message to all who care about the appearance of Del Norte County and Crescent City: Do not give up! Continue to file complaints on eyesore properties which offend your good senses. Ignore those who criticize you for caring about how our community looks. Volunteer for the clean-up efforts in your neighborhood and community.

And applaud those who demonstrate their values with action, not empty words.

Roger Gitlin founded “Take a Bite out of Blight” and “Pride in Community” while serving as Del Norte County District 1 Supervisor.