

Guest Column to THE NEWS-STAR
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From: Mayor James E. "Jamie" Mayo

Join Us in the Fight to Clean Up Our City

How many times have you hurried past a dilapidated house that was missing its windows, doors, or roof? How many times have you shaken your head at an overgrown lot with grass and weeds that are nearly as tall as you? Have you ever driven past a blighted building and then asked yourself "*When is someone going to do something about that place?*" Well, you're not alone. And, something has to be done to address the issue.

This blight issue is not unique to Monroe. Sadly, it is a common problem faced by many cities across the country. In Monroe, just like in many other places, property owners will let the city mow their overgrown vacant lot because it's cheaper to pay the city to do it instead of hiring a professional lawn mowing service.

In the past seven years we have torn down nearly 400 dilapidated structures. However, we have seen a roughly 40% reduction in the past two years. Many buildings that need to be torn down are still standing because of too much legal red tape and the fact that our current city council gives too much time before forcing condemned property to be torn down. My administration is trying to give proper consideration for the neighbors who are trying to keep their community safe and attractive...instead of passing the buck so that violators can avoid being truly held accountable for their lack of action.

Too many neighborhoods are infected with eyesores. These neglected structures are unsafe for many reasons. Children can get hurt because they see these buildings and lots as a place of adventure instead of danger. Criminals see them as a haven instead of a hazard. All the while, honest hard-working people suffer because property values decrease, accidents happen, and crimes take place because absentee landlords and property owners are not being held more accountable.

These are the reasons that my administration has worked for nearly a year crafting an effort we call *Fight the Blight*. The concept was introduced to us by a group of concerned citizens. It is modeled after a successful program in New Orleans and mirroring an effort already approved by the Ouachita Parish Police Jury. Volunteers and members of the City of Monroe legal, code enforcement, and beautification team has dedicated several months to research, planning and drafting legislation to benefit Monroe.

Members of our team first met with our city council members in October 2014 to discuss this effort. Councilman Wilson was the only member who was not able to attend those meetings. However, he had a detailed conversation with Assistant City Attorney Angie Baldwin about our *Fight the Blight* effort and Environmental Court plans earlier this year. He was so excited about this new plan that he offered to introduce it when it was time to bring the new laws before the city council. Given all of this, you can see why it came as a total shock to our team when the council voted down the ordinances that would have put our *Fight the Blight* effort into full gear. Some council members said they “didn’t know about” or that they “didn’t have time to properly vet” the proposed ordinances. That is simply not a true statement. They have known about this project for nearly eight months. Furthermore, since the items were up for introduction, protocol would have been for the council to introduce the items at the June 9th meeting. That would have given them two full weeks to ask any questions and get further details about what was being proposed in these new laws which would help clean up our city. Then they could have adopted the new laws at the June 23rd meeting. Instead, they once again, voted against progress!

The purpose of *Fight the Blight* is to revamp our city ordinances in such a way that the threat of facing more serious fines and penalties in Environmental Court will compel property owners to properly maintain their homes, businesses, and lots. Currently, when the city mows an abandoned lot the property owner pays as little as a \$75 fine. That’s relatively cheap. Property owners find it to be so cheap that the city mows between 3,000 and 4,000 lots per year. However, imagine how many property owners would mow and properly maintain their vacant lots if they

faced the threat of a \$ 125 to \$250 fine from the city. Our neighborhoods would look better in a short period of time.

When you buy a home or car it's your responsibility to pay the note each month. It goes the same when you own property. It becomes your responsibility to make sure it is safe, clean, and meets the standards set forth by law. Through *Fight the Blight* our goal is to put a system in place that will motivate more people to accept personal responsibility for their property. In rare and extreme cases the maximum penalty could involve the foreclosure of property. We expect this to be a rare occasion.

Having stiffer fines and penalties carried out through a streamlined judicial process has proven to be pivotal to the successful effort in New Orleans and it can work for Monroe. We need new laws with more teeth on the books. We need to speed up the process. We need to be more aggressive in our efforts to Keep Monroe Beautiful. We need YOU to join us in the fight to clean up our city!

By working together, we are making a difference! Monroe is one city, with one future!