

Cleaning up the streets

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent
Friday, 24 March 2023 04:24



Code enforcement officers tasked with managing homeless encampments

In old western movies, it's the sheriff that vows to clean up the town. In real life, it usually falls to code enforcement officers. It's a thankless, and sometimes dangerous, job.

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“It’s a difficult job to be a code enforcement officer because you are enforcing codes that nobody likes and that a lot of people feel aren’t important, but they are,” Planning Manager Nikki Lee, who oversees property cleanups, said.

Since July 1, the Planning and Development department has cleaned up nine private properties and cleared 20 homeless encampments. That blew through the department’s \$150,000 budget for this fiscal year, so planners had to go back for another \$75,000 that will hopefully take them through June.

“I think it’s because of the camps,” Lee said. “Years ago it was all private properties we were doing and we were doing OK with that. But now the camps are really eating up our budget.”

All of the cleanups are complaint-based, meaning that when someone reports a derelict property or encampment, the department goes out and investigates.

Cleaning up Gallup falls mostly into two categories: issues with occupied properties, and homeless encampments. Either way, the property owner may not be aware of the situation – Gallup has a lot of absentee landlords.

In the first instance, the problems are usually things such as weeds, trash and debris. For those the city has had the Clean & Lien program since 2012. That lets them contact property owners to ask them to clean up, then bill the property owner if the city has to do it. In between those things the city will give the property owner first, second and third notices, which give 14, seven and 10 days, respectively, to comply. Many do, but not everyone.

“Some of these property owners are repeat offenders and they know what’s going to happen so they refuse the mail. That makes it harder for us because then we can’t prove they were served a notice and we have to take extra steps to try to notify them,” Lee said. The city has about a 50% recovery rate on those cleanups.

In the second case, the city has to organize a team to go to verify that there’s an encampment and to go back to clear it.

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Clearing an encampment takes several steps, including contacting the property owner and the camp occupants and a walkthrough with a vendor to get an estimate for cleanup.

“Normally we do it in a sweep, because most of the time there is more than one camp that we’re going to,” Lee said. “We’re lucky if we only have four camps in one day. Sometimes it’s the whole day, just visiting camps all day.”

Once that’s done, a team returns with a police officer to do warrant checks and keep the peace, and a behavioral health representative tries to connect people with shelter or services. If children are in the camp, they have to call social services as well.

Encampments may be large or small, and campers can get creative.

“Sometimes camps are secluded. You just park and you have to walk pretty far through the mud, through the trees. But if it’s in city limits we have to address it,” Lee said.

With homeless encampments, the property owners are often cooperative because they want to get the camps cleaned at no cost to them, Lee said. But in other cases, the public can be brutal.

“Code enforcement officers have a tough job,” Lee said. “They get harassed. They get yelled at. They get things thrown at their units. And they’re not like a cop, they don’t have the authority [to arrest].”

Lee said an ongoing joke between code enforcement officers is “all we have to defend ourselves is a camera.”

The city just hired two new code enforcement officers to join the two seasoned veterans.

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Property owners aren't helpless. Individual owners can clean up trash and weeds on their properties, and it would help if some of them would get rid of inoperable vehicles, which Lee said are a huge problem in town.

For vacant properties, owners can clear trees and shrubbery that can hide campers, post no trespassing signs, file a form with police that allows the city to enter a property that's out of compliance and make sure to visit the properties regularly.

"I know it's expensive to put up a fence. But maybe put up a 'no trespassing' sign or just make it seem like there is a presence of the owners coming to check what's going on," Lee said. "If [campers] know that no one ever comes to check anything, they can just do what they want."

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