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City Enforces Home, Lawn Maintenance

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MADISON- Overgrown yards, RVs out in the open, rubbish piling up and "For Sale" signs on cars parked in driveways are just some of the eyesores Robert Dawson is looking for. As the city's zoning administrator, Dawson is charged with acting on zoning violations when property owners aren't maintaining their homes and yards. "The bottom line is if the individual property owner does not respond, then the city will," he said. The city has had a process to handle complaints about unsightly yards and homes and then act to correct the problems and bill the homeowners. But with Dawson hired this month to serve as zoning administrator, the city now has someone full time to oversee the process and is concentrating more on the unattractive problems, Mayor Mary Hawkins Butler said. Butler is encouraging aldermen to be on the lookout in their wards for eyesores that detract from the city's surroundings. "Robert will be on patrol to maintain the integrity of our neighborhoods. We need to look for ways to be aggressive in the neighborhoods." The city needs to focus on the problem of houses or yards that aren't being maintained which can lower their own or surrounding property values, Butler said. "We want to target homes, especially in older neighborhoods where there may not be covenants or an active homeowners' association." Nell Tharp, president of the Stonegate Homeowners Association, said she appreciates the city's backing. Her organization does its part to alert officials to problems, she said. "You want to do anything you can to protect your property," she said. "If you're trying to sell your house, you want it to look good and you want your neighbor's house to look good, too." Tharp said she has reported violations the homeowners' organization finds in the neighborhood when the residents don't respond. In the past, the organization has turned to legal action to right the problem. But, the city's strict enforcement laws means the neighborhood board doesn't have to dip into its dues to get results, she said. "We can get a lawyer to write a demand letter if there's a blatant violation of our covenants," Tharp said. "With the city's action we don't have to put the money out to get a lawyer." Barbara Richard, president of the Madison Beautification Commission, said residents need to alert officials when they spot overgrown yards, trash piled up for some time in a yard, cars up on blocks or other problems. "An unsightly neighborhood causes the lowering of property values. "If neighbors see problems, they need to mention it to the homeowner," Richard said. "If they don't do what's needed, it's time to call the city. We need to do anything we can to encourage people to keep up their property. That keeps up property values. "Madison is a beautiful city if everybody takes an interest," Richard said. Madison looks the way it does because "we are proactive and enforce our ordinances," Dawson said. "Those things in public view will determine the value of the property." Dawson is looking for problems visible from the street, such as unmaintained hedges or trees or grass that's grown over 12 inches. A growing problem Dawson has encountered is the number of inoperable vehicles parked in driveways or yards. "These are becoming a blight on the city," he said. If a vehicle can't pass the state inspection or get a tag because it can't be driven, it's

illegal to have it parked in view, Dawson said. He said he's seen cars in yards that have rotted tires or the air has leaked out of them because the vehicle hasn't been moved in a long time. Other problems with vehicles are people leaving "for sale" signs in view, which is not legal in a residential area, he said. At any given time, Dawson said he has about 35 to 40 cases he's investigating, but he has had up to 60. Dawson has instituted a tracking system for the process that begins with either finding a violation on his Friday afternoon drive around town or by neighbors or homeowners' associations calling in complaints. Dawson first sends out a letter that includes a photograph of the problem, cites the violation and gives a deadline for fixing the problem. If the problem isn't corrected, Dawson sends a second letter asking the owner to appear before the board of aldermen to explain why. "Usually 95 percent" of the people cited either cut the grass, remove the trash or move a junked vehicle by that point, Dawson said. Violators who don't respond face getting cited in a resolution by the board of aldermen that calls for the city attorney to take legal steps for the city fixing the problem and charging the property owner the cost and a \$250 fine, Dawson said. "The city maintains we would like to work it out diplomatically rather than by fines," he said. Sometimes, it's a case where the homeowner doesn't understand what the city requires, Dawson said. "I give people the benefit of the doubt and try to work with them. After I explain the violation, the ball is in their court how they want to be handled. Dawson said so far 95-98 percent of the people who receive letters comply with the ordinance and correct their violations before the city has to step in. Dawson said he plans to work closely with homeowners' associations to locate problems in the neighborhoods. "Northbay is one of the first we're working hand in hand with to go in and pick out areas that we know are causing a devaluation of property." In a recent ride through that neighborhood, Dawson said he found an RV in a driveway when it is supposed to be under a cover, a garage and driveway so full that cars were continually parked on the street, unmaintained grounds, rubbish on the side of a house and an inoperable vehicle with a two-year-old inspection sticker and four flat tires. To report zoning violations involving unkempt yards or residences can call Robert Dawson in Madison's community development office at 856-7116.