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Group Asks For Help to Fix Area's Problems

By Tom Palmer
The Ledger

LAKELAND -- Tom Parrotte and Bill Wood look at the halfcompleted sidewalks, the standing water and the abandoned buildings that mar their neighborhood off Combee Road, and they want something better.

Now they are working with their neighbors and county officials to try to do something about it.

But one of their challenges is to persuade more of the 5,500 people who live in this area between Lake Parker and Saddle Creek north of Memorial Boulevard to take an interest in their effort.

This month they plan to send surveys to some of their neighbors to see what the other people in the community think. And people who don't return the surveys may expect a personal visit to get their views firsthand.

The group known as the Combee Settlement Committee has been meeting at Combee Elementary since late May and will continue meeting this year through mid-November and will resume meetings after the holidays.

The pilot program is the result of a \$20,000 grant from the National Association of County and City Health Officials and was one of only eight awarded nationwide this year.

This program is seen as prototype for other neighborhood organizations to work to solve problems.

"This is an opportunity for the people to tell the government what to do (for their neighborhood) rather than having a bunch of stuffed shirts telling us what to do," Parrotte said.

He said some of his priorities are the development of a community center and increased police presence, which will foster community unity and deter crime.

But he's also interested in code enforcement and public improvements.

During a brief ride around the neighborhood, he points to dilapidated buildings that have been condemned but never razed, overgrown lots and a sidewalk that ends suddenly at Mineola Drive, forcing schoolchildren to walk or ride their bicycles along busy two-lane Fish Hatchery Road.

The driveway culverts in parts of the neighborhood are half full of sand, causing drainage problems.

Wood, who like Parrotte has lived in the neighborhood for decades, has an even longer list of problems he wants solved and wants others in the community to rank as concerns.

These include better drainage, code enforcement, street lights and sidewalks, more recreational facilities and economic revitalization.

"I think we also ought to talk about making Saddle Creek Park more family-friendly," he said, referring to problems with illegal sexual behavior that occurs there.



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Tom Parrotte, an activist in the Combee Elementary School neighborhood in Lakeland, points out things that need to be improved to make the area safer for children going to school along Fish Hatchery Road.

These and perhaps other questions will be in the survey tentatively set to be mailed to 500 homes in the neighborhood on Aug. 18. Deadline for responses will be Sept. 3.

On Sept. 20 the group will visit homes where no one responded to the surveys to talk to fellow residents about their concerns.

Helping them is Gloria Graham, a facilitator from the Polk County Health Department.

Graham said the ideas the group has come up with are good, but that some are expensive. It will take a long-term commitment to prove to county commissioners that the projects the neighborhood group wants will be a good investment, she said.

"You have to find a way to make people think you care," she said.