

# Talking trash

By TOM MORTON



Natrona County's only code enforcement officer, Linda McLarnan, spends most of her time driving the 5,000 square miles of the county inspecting code violations. (Tim Kupsick/Star-Tribune) #2



Yard debris and unlicensed vehicles are the easy to see signs of Natrona County code violations that Linda McLarnan addresses during her inspections and cleanup efforts. (Tim Kupsick/Star-Tribune)

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A few hundred tires here, a few dozen derelict cars there; and pretty soon they add up to more than a few huge piles of junk.

In Natrona County, the number of piles -- breeding grounds for vermin, disease, fire and lowered property values -- has declined sharply in recent years through the efforts of its Development Department's lone code enforcement officer Linda McLarnan.

Wednesday, McLarnan and County Development Director Blair Leist drove through several subdivisions east and west of Casper to show the improvements over recent years, and point to some of the clutter on the prairie.

She was particularly proud of the efforts at Brookhurst, where people not only removed junk but landscaped and fenced their yards, she said.

McLarnan may have needed to do some prodding, but the efforts were worth it, she said.

"I tell them everything is a 'workable situation,'" she said. "I would rather work with people rather than go through the legal department."

But sometimes litigation is the county's only recourse.

At Sand Dunes Estates, McLarnan drove around adjoining lots with at least five mobile homes, at least one motor home, and an undetermined number of cars, pallets, barrels, tires and other stuff.

Code enforcement inspections in October 2007 reported these violations, and notified owner Edward Corrigan the mobile homes were dangerous and should be demolished.

Further inspections in June 2008, and May and July 2009 revealed no remedial work had been done, according to court records. "Further, additional mobile homes have been placed on the subject property without proper permits and unregistered vehicles have been placed upon the subject property."

The county's lawsuit against Corrigan highlighted the dangers to the community. "Defendant's property is, and has been, kept in a state which is a haven for vermin and constitutes a fire hazard."

The county wants the property cleaned up, an injunction stopping Corrigan's activities and to fine him up to \$750 for each day he violated the county codes.

Corrigan responded Natrona County is a corporation and not a government, so it does not have any authority to tell him what to do with his property, he said Friday.

"I do not consent to any of your jurisdictional claims," he wrote in response to the county's lawsuit. "I do not consent to contract with you. I waive your benefits. I do not accept any order from you."

In nearby Brookhurst subdivision, McLarnan said county regulations prohibit more than one residence on a lot and prohibit more than one building using a single septic system.

The owners of that property applied for and received a zoning certificate to place a new modular home on their lot with the condition that the existing home be removed to be in compliance with the septic system regulations, she said.

Subsequent inspections by the City of Casper-Natrona County Health Department showed the existing home was not removed and was closer than five feet to the septic system. Both old and new homes were connected to the septic system, according to a civil suit filed by the county against owners James and Callie Cole.

But Callie Cole responded that the old home has been completely disconnected from the septic tank, water and other utilities.

She also doubts that anyone from the health department conducted an on-site inspection, she said. "I don't see how they could (have inspected it) because we've got a dog that doesn't allow anybody he doesn't know out of the car."

## **Progress**

Gino Cerullo, a member of the county's Planning and Zoning Commission, said he'd like to see the county rewrite its codes and enforce them more vigorously.

"It seems everybody I talk to has issues that private properties are trashy," Cerullo said.

Cerullo, Leist, McLarnan and the commissioners also would like the development department add staff to enhance the progress so far, they have said.

Four years ago, McLarnan said the county had more than 600 known violations of people whose properties were out of compliance with the rules about trash.

"A lot of people consider what they have on their property as collectibles," McLarnan said.

After a while, though, the stuff distorts whatever meaning the coiner of the phrase "one man's trash is another man's treasure" intended, she said.

In the spring of 2007, the county government budgeted for 30-foot-long Roll-Offs for residents to dispose metal, tires and other debris.

Since then, the number of known violations has dropped to 300, Leist said. "People really do use it."

McLarnan's efforts garnered praise beyond the county, when the American Association of Code Enforcement recently deemed her among the top 12 of 1,237 code enforcers nationwide, Leist said.

Code enforcement isn't easy, she said. "It's one of the most difficult issues to work on in any jurisdiction."

Public officials want to honor private property and private property rights, but must look at the effects on others' property and property rights, McLarnan said

"It comes down to public health, safety and welfare," she said.

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