

Residents rally to Take Back Antioch

by Justin Lafferty

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When Antioch resident Brittney Gougeon started a Facebook page on Dec. 23 called Take Back Antioch, she didn't quite know what to expect, but hoped for some discussion about how to make the city safer.

Gougeon's initial goal was for 300 people to join the page in three months. As of Wednesday, more than 1,000 concerned citizens "liked" the page and have banded together in an effort to take

back the city from crime, which many residents feel has made Antioch a dangerous place in which to live or do business.

According to acting police chief Allan Cantando, 15 homicides were reported in Antioch in 2010. Talks are underway to try to avoid layoffs of police officers on the already under-staffed department as the city struggles to stay solvent. But while the City is preoccupied with its fiscal woes, Gougeon's effort has begun to attract other residents willing to step up and help address quality of life issues rather than wait out the recession and see things get worse.

Gougeon, a 23-year-old homeowner, felt compelled to do something after hearing of a crime in her neighborhood. A Web developer by trade, she started the Take Back Antioch page on Facebook; then started contacting people who commented on news stories, asking if they wanted to join this group.

"I had already been feeling more and more concerned about being out in my neighborhood, because of some of the things that I've seen," said Gougeon, who has lived in Antioch for about two years. "As that progressed, I finally said 'enough is enough.'"

She made sure that the page isn't just one big gripe session against city officials or city laws, but rather a place where Antioch residents can talk about ways to improve the city without asking for money. People have posted pictures of children playing in happier, safer Antioch times as a way of showing what they want the city to return to. Community clean-up events, which used to be scheduled by the police department but have been delayed due to budget cuts, have been organized on the page's wall.

"I joined right away because I thought 'this is great; there's other citizens that agree with me and want to stop the crime here,'" said Kenji Freitas, a 44-year resident of Antioch. "Having lived here a long time, I've seen the change in the city probably from a different viewpoint than a lot of younger people that came in later on. ... It's

just sad to see a nice town go downhill like that.”

Freitas and a couple dozen other people from the site made it to Tuesday’s City Council meeting, many holding “Take Back Antioch Supporter” signs printed up by Sheila White, an Antioch resident for 41 years and a member of the Garrow Estates Neighborhood Watch. White heard about the Facebook page from her son and is thrilled that a group of citizens – in light of cuts to the city and police department – are focused on making a positive difference in Antioch.

“We want to support our community,” White said. “But we have to have some support, too. We’ve already learned the hard way that you can’t accomplish anything without police backup, and we don’t have police backup right now.”

People have also posted photos of graffiti in their area, showing what they hope they can improve. Larry Treat, a graffiti abatement volunteer for the Antioch Community Team, posted several of these pictures and hopes that a stronger volunteer effort will help stop the growing trend of tagging.

Treat, who has been living in Antioch for 12 years, said the quick removal of graffiti might discourage criminals from desecrating buildings and other city structures and provoke them to go somewhere else. He’s hoping that Take Back Antioch can build off the progress made by ACT, such as cleaning up a homeless encampment in a city park that had gotten out of control.

“At this point, with what Brittney has developed, we’re ready to just join with her,” Treat said. “She’s a natural leader. I’m feeling it and I’m loving it.”

Gougeon has been meeting with city officials such as Mayor Jim Davis and city councilman Gary Agopian since the creation of her group. She’s hoping that Take Back Antioch can become a hub of discussion and support for Antioch citizens who feel unsafe or ignored.

“I totally endorse what they’re trying to accomplish,” Agopian said. “What they’re looking for is for Antioch to be that safe, vibrant and inclusive place that we all want. I agree with that and I support that. ... I think the key for us is to harness it where we’re working together to accomplish those goals.”

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