

# Fighting crime in a central Fresno neighborhood, one tree limb at a time

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The leaves on the trees at Saginaw Way and Effie Street are gone, but so is the criminal element, at least for now.

Fresno police detective Christopher Lee calls the arboreal trimming “crime prevention through environmental design.” Before, drug dealers and others involved in illegal activity were taking refuge in the shade, he said. On Wednesday, the street was placid and quiet, at least a temporary victory in a neighborhood near Dakota Avenue and east of Blackstone Avenue that has long battled crime, including drive-by shootings, gangs and drug dealing.

Just last week, a shooting (police called it gang-related) left a man critically injured. And Wednesday night, another man was shot in the chest by a suspect at East Saginaw Way and North Glen Avenue, north of the Manchester Center shopping mall.

The tree trimming is just one tactic that Lee, a problem-oriented police officer, and others are taking in a bid to revitalize the neighborhood. Police are working with business and property owners along with city government in a bid to make long-term changes.

It’s gotten a lot better.

Laura Denies, apartment complex manager in the neighborhood

It’s getting worse.

Ron McBride, whose family owns an apartment complex in the neighborhood

Opinions on the success so far vary widely.

“It’s gotten a lot better,” said Laura Denies, who manages an apartment complex across the street from where the trees were trimmed. She said those responsible for gambling, drinking and prostitution have moved on.

But Ron McBride, whose family owns another complex in the 3900 block of North Clark Avenue, several blocks east, is not convinced.

“It’s getting worse,” he said. McBride said there is not enough police presence, and efforts in other parts of the neighborhoods are driving the bad elements his way.

Lee would be the first to admit efforts to change the area are a work in progress. He noted that his boss, Lt. Donald Gross, who now oversees the northeast area policing district, was tasked with controlling problems in the neighborhood some years ago. But he’s confident in a new approach. The key, he stresses, is having those who live, work and have property in the area take ownership of the issue.

Policing is often a numbers game. Officers review calls for service in an area and look for ways to drive down the number of times police have to respond. For example, Lee said he is working to get property owners to work together to identify problem tenants so that someone evicted from one complex does not turn up at another down the street.

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Fresno police detective Christopher Lee

“If you want a good neighborhood, you have to screen for good tenants,” he tells them. His hope: that property owners will take a larger view of the neighborhood and manage it as a whole.

He said property owners are also showing a financial commitment. One owner recently invested \$120,000 in improvements. Another shelled out about \$50,000.

“Property owners and managers are getting educated, and they are educating their tenants,” he said.

The city’s code enforcement division is conducting safe-housing inspections, Lee said, so that tenants can be sure they are getting a quality living environment. He’s also working to bring faith-based groups into the process.

McBride is not worried about his tenants, but rather a troublesome element that drifts into his complex from the surrounding area.

“Ninety percent of the problems are caused by visitors,” he said. They bring with them loud music, parties and drugs. He added that he wanted to “sell and get the hell out of Fresno.”

Denies, however, remains optimistic about the complex she manages.

“We’re getting more patrols in the neighborhood and we’re changing the environment,” she said.

She added that she has had help from City Council Member Clint Olivier as well as police in making things better, and added:

“We’ll do our part and (the city) will do their part.”

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