

Prioritizing Public Safety, fighting blight

It is always gratifying as a Councilmember to have the opportunity to vote on an item that is a “win-win.” Your Memphis City Council had such an opportunity at its most recent meeting on Tuesday, July 26th in the Council Chambers.

Recently, Las Savell Jewelry announced it would be closing its store at 61 South McLean Boulevard, which had operated since 1984. While we are saddened to see this Memphis institution go, their vacation of the building at the corner of McLean and Union created a unique opportunity for the City of Memphis.

One focus of the City Administration since Mayor Strickland took office is recruiting more Public Safety personnel to help make our City a safer place. Recently, a study by international consulting firm Deloitte recommended the City’s Public Safety recruiting effort needs a storefront to which interested citizens might go for information on applying for Public Safety jobs. The building at 61 S. McLean sits at an intersection passed by some 50,000 vehicles per day, offering a high-visibility location for our Public Safety recruiting efforts.

In addition, the building is adjacent to Memphis Fire Station 11. This station is in an excellent location to serve the needs of its community but suffers from a severe lack of parking for its employees and visiting citizens, including those with disabilities. Purchasing the former jewelry store – and its parking lot – would allow the fire station to use this lot for its parking needs.

Presented with this opportunity to aid both Fire Station 11 and our Public Safety recruiting program, the Council unanimously voted to approve this purchase, which is currently under contract. The \$600,000 cost will come out of the \$7 million already allocated for recruiting from the Public Safety referendum passed in 2020. I was glad to vote for this purchase, which Councilman Jeff Warren termed a “win-win” for the City.



Keeping you informed

Another focus of both the Administration and this Council is working to combat the blight and illegal dumping that pervades too much of our City. This Herculean task falls to the Code Enforcement Department of our Public Works Division. At the Council's July 26th meeting, Public Works Director Robert Knecht gave a presentation on Code Enforcement's efforts in this regard.

Director Knecht said the Department's approximately 72 inspectors handle an average of more than 27,000 Service Requests per year. These cases arise both from citizen complaints through 311, and from observations that Code Inspectors make as they canvass the City. The Department currently has more than 9,900 active cases.

The Director said Code officers work hard to help bring owners and properties into compliance without having to cite them to court. Of the 122,140 Service Requests processed since 2018, some 50 percent were brought into compliance without court action. Another 40 percent were closed because they were duplicate requests, had incorrect information, were found not justified by Code Inspectors or fell to other City or County entities. The rest of the cases remain active or have been dismissed in court.

If a property fails to come into compliance, ultimately Code Enforcement will cite the owner or property to Environmental Court. Director Knecht said since 2018, just over 3,000 properties have been cited to court – which is only 5 percent of the total Service Requests during that time. Currently there are 382 active or recently dismissed (but not off the docket) cases before the court.

The City Council is grateful to our Code Enforcement officers; and while we wish someone could wave a magic wand and clean up the City, we understand the department must go through due process to bring property owners into compliance. We also understand the daunting numbers Director Knecht presented are too big a task for just 72 people. Keeping our city clean will require effort on the part of elected officials, property owners and tenants, and all citizens.

That is why we were excited to hear about a new partnership between the City of Memphis, the Memphis City Beautiful Commission and community sponsors including the Memphis Grizzlies to encourage litter cleanup throughout the city. The “Slam Dunk Litter League” is an eight-week competition planned for September and October in which teams will get points for each bag of litter they pick up.

City Beautiful hopes to recruit 140 teams of 10 people each to compete (20 teams per each of the 7 Single-Member Council Districts). In addition to a \$1,500 cash prize for the First-Place team, each of the top 3 teams will receive tickets to see a Grizzlies game from the Mayor’s Suite. There also will be quarterly (every two week) prizes for the top teams in each Council District.

Along with the City Beautiful Commission, we hope this innovative program will encourage citizens to become involved in cleaning up our city. As CBC Executive Director Eldra White noted to the Council on July 26th, “Litter is indeed a people problem that people can fix.” Please watch our Council social media for more pertinent information on the Slam Dunk Litter League, visit www.memphiscitybeautiful.org or call 636-4410.

A moment of gratitude:

I am very fortunate to serve you each day along with my colleagues working to advance our great city. Stay tuned for future Council updates as we keep you informed regarding the activities taking place here at City Hall. As always, for an archive of meeting recordings, you may visit <https://www.memphistn.gov/government/watch-public-meetings-online/>.



Yours in service,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jamita E. Swearengen".

Jamita Swearengen
Chairwoman, Memphis City Council
District 4