

Loudoun Activists Find New Campaign; Unkempt Yards The Next Enemy

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Body

A **Loudoun** County community that had been a target of last year's regional effort to cut down on illegal immigration is again the center of a county cleanup **campaign**.

But this time, instead of focusing on immigration status, county leaders are embarking on a months-long effort to tackle the **unkempt** lawns, crowded homes and truck-jammed curbs they say have eroded the quality of life in Sterling Park, a working-class neighborhood on **Loudoun**'s eastern edge that has lost some of its suburban luster since its founding in the 1960s.

"I want to deal with fixing up the neighborhood: the high-grass complaints, the incidents of tagging, the complaints of rat infestations," said Supervisor Susan Klimek Buckley (D-Sugarland Run), who represents an area just north of Sterling Park. "I'm not going to get bogged down by illegal versus legal right now. I want to clean up my neighborhood."

Last year, frustration over the community's deteriorating conditions erupted when it became the epicenter of the county's debate over illegal immigration. Members of an **activist** group in Sterling Park and some candidates for local office blamed conditions on an influx of illegal immigrants who they said crowded into single-family homes and cared little for the community.

But the fervor against illegal immigrants has died down somewhat, especially now that a slate of lawmakers critical of some crackdowns has taken control of the county's Board of Supervisors.

This spring, officials held meetings in the Sterling area. They will use residents' testimony to help create a community improvement program. On Tuesday, officials will consider regulations that would ban the parking of cars in **yards** and allow volunteers to mow untended lawns. Many residents also have called for stepped-up zoning enforcement to crack down on overcrowded homes, an ongoing issue that supervisors are likely to take up again this fall.

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By Washington area standards, Sterling Park is still a suburban haven, with low crime and modest, tree-shaded homes that a grocery store clerk can afford. But in affluent Loudoun, better known for its cathedral ceilings and 100-year-old farmhouses, it is an anomaly.

Although the neighborhood is largely well maintained, sprinkled among the landscaped yards and freshly painted front porches are overgrown lawns, cars parked in yards and peeling facades. The problem has been exacerbated by the recent spate of foreclosures, which has helped send housing values in Loudoun plummeting, especially in Sterling and Sterling Park.

"When I came here seven years ago, it was very nice," said Maria S. Escobar, 44, a resident from Bolivia who works at a nearby deli counter, as she stood on the edge of her neatly cropped lawn on a recent afternoon. "Now, oh my God, it is not like that anymore."

Many longtime Sterling Park neighbors who kept their homes tidy were gone, she said, replaced by newcomers who leave cars -- and sometimes garbage -- in their front yards. Two foreclosed homes sat empty on her cul-de-sac. Cars come and go at all hours, she said.

Buckley and others say the problems in the Sterling area stem primarily from years of inattention by county officials who were more focused on fast-growing areas. Loudoun's population has more than tripled since 1990, with most of the newcomers settling in fresh housing developments in communities such as Ashburn and South Riding.

"The county got so caught up because of the tremendous growth that we've had for the last nearly 17 years," said board Chairman Scott K. York (I). "What happened through that period of time is there wasn't necessarily that focus on Sterling and other eastern communities."

The renewed focus on Sterling has won praise from some of the staunchest illegal-immigrant opponents.

"I think it's a different approach to the same problem," said Joe Budzinski, a spokesman for Help Save Loudoun, a group that has blamed much of the problems in Sterling on illegal immigrants. "It's a perfectly valid approach, because if it weren't for the fact of people not caring for their homes, no one is going to care if they are illegal or not."

Stricter zoning enforcement might even have the unintended consequence of driving out illegal immigrants who cannot comply, Budzinski added.

Not everyone thinks such new rules are necessary. Walter Mundt, 62, a Sterling Park resident, said he understands the concerns but believes that "the county should stay out of it." Sulma Molina, 25, said the neighborhood could use some sprucing up but that it was a pleasant neighborhood that didn't need drastic changes.

"I like that it is so quiet," she said. "A child can play outside and not worry about anything."

Molina, an immigrant from El Salvador here on a work permit, moved into her home two weeks ago with her husband, her two children, a brother and a cousin. On a recent morning, two vehicles sat on the property, one in the driveway and another to the side on the grass. The lawn parking is necessary, she said, so she can go to her housekeeping job in the morning without moving her husband's truck.

Children's toys, boxes and recycling items sat on the front yard. "We like to be clean, but it is just not possible right now" because the family moved in two weeks ago, she said. She added that she expected the recycling to be picked up in a few days.

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