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"Alone, we can do so little; together, we can do so much" – Helen Keller

It takes a village...

The exact origin of this adage is unknown, at least to me. Yet, we've all heard, "It takes a village to raise a child." Let's look at this proverb and the first five words, "It takes a village to." What you have is the beginning of a call to action: It takes many people's help or involvement to achieve some goal. Many tasks we complete in our lifetime take other people's help, from learning new skills to the teamwork required to win a basketball game.

Now let's look at the word "village." In most parts of the world, villages are settlements of people clustered around a central point – a community. Communities differ for many reasons, one being the culture or the values, beliefs, and behavior.

Would you agree that "It takes a village to effect change?" Yes, I said the "C" word – CHANGE. I'm not suggesting that everyone is resistant to change, and I fully understand that some feel comfortable with things the way they are. Just as important, I understand that change invokes anxiety, hostility, and frustration in some people. At the same time, it takes "change" to move forward, progress, or grow.

What kind of change, if any, would you like to see in our community? I would guess some of you said "blight," "junky yards," "overgrown lots and yards," or 'dilapidated houses." In his book "13 Ways to Kill Your Community," Doug Griffiths proposes that first impressions are the beginning of everything. So what is the first impression of our community to outsiders? Some folks may say, "Who cares what they think." I suggest we all should care. If we want our community to grow, we need folks to invest in our community, families to move into our community, and our young adults to return after college or trade school. Griffiths provides an appropriate analogy. "Imagine the first impression of your community is like a job interview. Did you show up neat and presentable? Did you look and sound confident? I imagine you did. If you show up unkempt and slovenly, you may be the smartest person in the world and perfect for the job, but you probably won't get the job."

If you said you would like to see less blight, junky yards, overgrown lots and yards, or dilapidated houses, I would agree that ridding the community of these items would improve Russell's aesthetic appeal and quality of life. So, why doesn't the City do anything about it? The City enforces property maintenance, nuisance, and overgrowth codes to the extent that state law and available funds allow. So, why isn't the City stricter? Well, most nuisances abatement processes must follow state law and the due process within those laws. Due process, an important provision of the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, states, "nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law." The procedural due

process encased in state law is one of the reasons you may call in a nuisance or overgrown yard, and it seems like the City "isn't doing anything."

Here is an example of a property owner with junk all over the yard:

- The City must notify the property owner of the specific violation(s) by personal service.
- If unable to serve the notice in person – sometimes people won't answer their door
- Then City must send the notice by USPS certified mail with a return receipt requested.
- It can take a few days to several weeks before the City will receive the return receipt or notice that the letter was undeliverable.
- When the notice is personally served or served by USPS certified mail, the property owner has ten (10) days to appeal and ask for a hearing before the City Council.
- Once proper notice is served, or the owner requests a hearing before the City Council, the item is placed on the next regular Council agenda – the 1st or 3rd Tuesday of each month.

The Council is presented with a resolution to order the abatement of the nuisance. The governing body must consider the facts and determine if they will approve a resolution ordering the abatement of the nuisance. Suppose the Council approves the resolution ordering the abatement of the nuisance. In that case, they also determine the amount of time, usually ten days, the property owner has to abate the violation. The City must serve the property owner notice that they have (10) days to abate the violation. Again, the process requires that the resolution is served personally to the owner, and the notice must be published in the newspaper if personal service is unsuccessful.

This process has taken, on average, sixty (60) days or longer, and the violation is still not abated. All proper notice is served, a resolution ordering the abatement of the violation is adopted, and notice is served; now, we can clean up the property. On average, it takes over sixty days to reach the point where the City can abate or clean up the nuisance, and it takes even more time and money to condemn property and repair or remove it. Recently, the City Council changed the overgrowth process for property owners who are residents of the City. The time is reduced significantly. The process for non-residential owners and all other nuisances remains unchanged. To make those changes will require a change in state law.

Let's go back to the proverb, "It takes a village" - It takes many people's help or involvement is needed to achieve some goal.

To truly make an impact on eliminating blight –junk, overgrowth, or dilapidated houses - we must change how we approach it and work together as a community to improve our quality of life. The City cannot do it alone. Some folks believe it is the City's sole responsibility to clean up blight and improve the community's aesthetics or curb appeal. It is self-defeating for the City to be the sole bearer of cleaning up the community. Remember those abatements we talked about a few minutes ago – mowing an overgrown lot, hauling off junk, tearing down dangerous structures? Yes, you and I pay a majority of those costs through taxes.

What am I asking? Let's work together to solve blight. We need people of influence within the community willing to speak up and help their neighbors. It's your block, neighborhood, and community. Ask your neighbor if they need assistance. Maybe they don't realize that blowing bagfuls of grass clippings into the gutter contributes to blocked storm drains and flooding, or

they leave tall weeds around the yard's perimeter or hang over the curb because they don't have a weed eater. That pile of junk might result from not having a way to get it to the landfill. I'm not asking that you mow their yard, pick up the grass blanket in the gutter, or haul off their junk unless you want to help your neighbor out. Maybe you know of a resource that can help them, which in turn cleans up the neighborhood. More importantly, they might not realize that the condition of their property does not align with the neighborhood and community values. If neighbors reach out to neighbors and the City continues to focus on those who won't clean it up, we've collaborated to clean up the town and demonstrated that blight is unacceptable in our community. I've seen time after time when this community rallies behind folks who've experienced tragedy or needed help. The response is remarkable and embodies the city vision statement:

"We will continue to be a community dedicated to family, friends, and neighbors, where generations care for each other. We are One Russell, building a self-reliant future, and this is home."

If the City works at it alone, progress will be slow. If civic groups and individuals work at it alone, progress will be slow. In research from Griffiths, local government supports the investment in beautification (reducing blight) in successful communities. Investment also comes from businesses, homeowners, landlords, and volunteer groups – in other words, everyone is invested in the initiative. As a public official and proud Russell resident, I ask you to check on our neighbor, lend a hand, and demonstrate that blight is not an acceptable community value. For those who realize their property is blighted, overgrown, or full of junk – if you need help, call me, and we can work together to find a solution.

It takes a village to effect change. Working together is how we will reduce blight, increase community pride, and improve quality of life. Many people's help or involvement is needed to achieve that goal. Together, we can strengthen our community.