

Nonprofit to remove blight from JSU foundation property

[Anna Wolfe](#), The Clarion-Ledger Published 2:26 p.m. CT Feb. 13, 2017

Recent attempts to draw attention to rundown, abandoned properties near Jackson State University have proved successful.

Less than two months after community members gathered to urge JSU to address blight near the campus in west Jackson, a nonprofit has agreed to help the university foundation demolish and clean up the properties.



Photo: Justin Sellers/The Clarion-Ledger

Revitalize Mississippi Inc., and the JSU Development Foundation, which owns the properties, signed a memorandum of understanding Feb. 6. The nonprofit has agreed to demolish the properties within 90 days at no cost to the foundation or university.

Sandra Hodge, foundation director, said Revitalize Mississippi's involvement has allowed the foundation to direct its funds to other university needs like scholarships for students.

"We have resources that would have been able to be put forward to take care of this but never at the capacity to be able to knock down all these structures at one time and be able to have such a mass cleanup of so many properties simultaneously," Hodge said.

The JSU Foundation bought up the properties incrementally over four years ago with the intention of building a dorm on the lots, but amid the university's financial woes, development stalled and the homes were left unattended. Residents and members of the nearby church, St. Mark's Episcopal Church, have complained about an increase in illegal activity in the area due to the 22 abandoned structures, which includes an old apartment complex. ACE Demolition began bulldozing the apartment complex Monday morning.

Revitalize Mississippi will not only demolish the 22 structures but clean up an additional 22 properties, turning a total of 42 parcels into green space until it is developed.

"This is the kind of cooperation and community involvement Jackson needs," said Sen. John Horhn, D-Jackson, a candidate in Jackson's mayoral race.

Community members calling for the demolition originally estimated they would need \$200,000 to get the job done.

When asked if the city deemed the property a code violation and if it penalized JSU, Jackson Mayor Tony Yarber's spokesperson Shelia Byrd only emailed the response: "During the course of the city identifying the properties and initiating code violation cases, Jackson State University reached out to the city to inform officials that university officials would go in a different route and handle their own demolitions for the properties."

Revitalize Mississippi President Jim Johnston, a local retired doctor who's more comfortable behind the scenes, formed his company in 2015 with the goal of improving the community through private partnerships. His nonprofit provides volunteer work to the public and other community organizations.

Johnston began conversations with community members and officials like Horhn about tackling the JSU blight just days after a Dec. 16 Working Together Jackson press conference about the matter.

His group also partnered with the city of Jackson for its Neighbors First program, which allows homeowners to purchase nearby blighted properties for as little as \$50.

Horhn said in December that the JSU student housing proposal, a \$65 million to \$75 million private-public partnership, wouldn't have cost the university a dime. But Institutions for Higher Learning halted the project. In an October board meeting, overwhelmed by JSU's financial woes, IHL officials declined to hear JSU's request to enter a contract to build the dorm, suggesting it should focus on getting its books in order.

Horhn said the university originally designed a 630-bed dorm but is considering scaling back to a 200-bed facility.

Hodge directed any questions about the cause of the stalled project to IHL.

"University leadership is currently focused on bringing expenses in line with revenue in the university's operating budget and is conducting a cost-benefit analysis on all areas, including housing resources," Glenn Boyce, commissioner of Higher Education, said in an emailed statement. "We recognize the importance of students having suitable housing and will continue to work with university leadership and others to identify viable opportunities that will ensure students' needs are met."

In the 2016 session, the Mississippi Legislature passed Senate Bill 2629 to give JSU the authority to enter the proposed public-private partnership, one of the last required steps before development could begin.

Horhn said the foundation has acquired "a considerable amount of debt to assemble this property, and all of a sudden we're at a standstill."

At least after Revitalize Mississippi is through, the area will be clean until development progresses.

Chris Bunley, who lives on Poindexter Street next door to these properties, attended the demolition "party" held Monday by Working Together Jackson. He said after years of living next to dilapidated homes, he's looking forward to watching his neighborhood thrive.

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