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Faith leaders draw attention to crime, sewage, darkness in Stony Point

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The Stony Point neighborhood in western Bastrop County is sometimes referred to by its residents as a dumping ground.

A dumping ground for trash. For stray dogs. For bodies. [Nine have turned up in Del Valle](#) since September.

Twenty years ago, the sewage in Stony Point was so bad it backed up into people's yards. In some sections today, after a hard rain, it still does.

The residents that live there often say they feel neglected.

"This area is right on the county line," community organizer Sabrina Jennings said. "It feels like it's brushed off to the side and forgotten."

Jennings, who works with the Corridor Interfaith Alliance for Families, was drawn to Stony Point several months ago while substitute teaching in the Bastrop school district. She immediately took notice of the problems plaguing the community and called on the alliance to help.

An outgrowth of Austin Interfaith, the Central Texas group coordinates with local faith communities to identify and train neighborhood leaders. They host house meetings to get feedback from residents on issues they are facing.

About 15 people from Stony Point began meeting in September. Since then, upwards of 100 have attended various gatherings in the neighborhood, Jennings said.

On March 19, the Bastrop County group held a town hall meeting at San Juan Diego Catholic Church. They invited officials, including Bastrop County Judge Paul Pape, Precinct 3 Commissioner Mark Meuth and Bastrop County Sheriff Maurice Cook to attend.

Interfaith leaders arrived with an agenda of issues, chief among them the sewage.



A wasteland

In a small green house on Stony Point Drive, Lydia Bautista tends to her potted plants. She's lived there with her husband now 30 years and remembers when the sewage in the neighborhood was so bad it left standing pools of wastewater in the streets. Bautista is a community activist, and in the early 2000s rallied with residents to make sure officials took notice.

In 2007, with a community development block grant, commissioners began a 10-phase project to connect the community through a centralized system to a sewage treatment plant. Every year or so, they receive another \$350,000 in funding and complete another phase. But it's been a decade so far and there are still sections of Stony Point that aren't connected to the system.

"When there are heavy rains there is sewage overflowing," Jennings said. "It's backing up into people's homes. A lot of families are very low income so they can't afford to have it pumped all the time. Sometimes they are emptying it out themselves into the ditches."

Desperate to find a solution, interfaith leaders encouraged Meuth to apply for grant funding from the state's economically distressed areas program to accelerate the project. But Meuth said Bastrop County didn't qualify for EDAC funding.

He ensured he would work with the county's grant coordinator to search out another option.

In the meantime, Jennings said they've met with state Rep. John Cyrier and Aqua Water, which handles wastewater treatment for the neighborhood, to come up with an answer.

"They began all these phases at least 10 years ago," Jennings said. "Going at that rate, we're looking at another four to six years. It's just terrible conditions for people to be living in."

The discussions are still ongoing.

"It's a slow process, but when you're asking for free, you take at their criteria and not as fast as you want it," Pape said. "Patience is part of the need right now."



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Stony Point also has road and drainage problems, not unlike other parts of the county.

The flooding has gotten so bad resident Ramiro Alonzo said last year he had to carry his grandmother from her home when the water rushed up like a river. Many of the houses sit in the 100-year floodplain. For those property owners, officials said they have little in the way of solutions. Meuth did, however, commit to completing a hydraulic study of the neighborhood to see if there were any remedies.

'Left in the dark'

Two weeks ago the grass at Cedar Creek Park was two-feet high. Fallen tree limbs blocked access to the county-owned property, which residents say had fallen into disrepair through the years. Still today,

garbage in Stony Point collects in the streets. At night, it's pitch black, and wild dogs run rampant through the neighborhood.

Resident Alberto Rangel, who likes to take walks in the evening with his wife, said he's been forced inside.

"The community has been left in the dark," Jennings said.

Many residents have complained it takes too long for ambulances to arrive on emergency calls to the neighborhood. Nurse Amy Roedl said once she waited 47 minutes for medics to arrive to treat a man with a serious heart condition.

"These are situations of life and death," she said.

Acadian EMS used to have a dispatch center nearby in Cedar Creek. It has since closed, and ambulances usually drive in from Bastrop, Pape said.

Pape told residents EMS should not take more than 19 minutes to arrive for emergencies. He said if it does, Acadian is violating its contract with the county, and residents should report it.

To combat the problem with wild dogs, the Bastrop County Animal Shelter will host a free spay and neuter clinic in the neighborhood in June. Road and bridge crews have promised to install lights at Cedar Creek Park so residents feel safe at night. Immediately after the meeting, crews went to the park and mowed the lawn.

But the spike in crime remains, which stands out as the biggest problem in Stony Point. It was one of the first concerns Jennings heard from residents when she arrived. People dealing drugs. The sounds of gunfire at night. The bodies dumped along [Wolf Lane](#), [Buck Lane](#) and [Pearce Lane](#) over a few months.

Interfaith leaders had planned to ask the sheriff's office to step up patrols in the area. However, as deportation fears spread throughout immigrant communities in Austin and Central Texas, Jennings said residents had to first be assured they'd be safe in their own neighborhoods before inviting more police in.

And while Cook assured interfaith leaders in private meetings that his deputies would not act as federal immigration agents, he did little to assuage resident fears at the town hall meeting, seemingly flip-flopping on the issue, Jennings said.

"The sheriff's office wants information on these murders," Jennings said. "But people don't feel safe to call."

She has been working with the immigrant community to educate them on their rights, instruct them what documents to have on hand in case of an emergency and how to access legal aid.

It's a small start. And even officials admit they have a long way to go.

“Nothing is going to change overnight. Some things aren’t going to change quickly,” Pape said. “But there are several things we can do that won’t cost a lot of money but will mean a lot to that neighborhood if we can play a role in bringing them toward being a better and safer community.”