

# ATLANTA'S COMBAT ZONE



Painted plea on a fence  
in English Avenue

Abandoned houses, heroin dealers, prostitutes and out-of-control garbage (and rats) plague English Avenue and Vine City, despite millions of dollars in public investment

BY STEPHANIE RAMAGE

**T**he girl looked to be about 15 years old. As she staggered up from a mat on the floor of an abandoned house in the English Avenue neighborhood, Juanita Wallace knew what she probably was: another heroin junkie/prostitute in a neighborhood that has seen far too many of them in far too many empty houses crawling with rats and criminals.

Wallace, who serves on the public safety committee for the neighborhood, told the City of Atlanta's Weed and Seed steering committee last week how she stumbled upon the girl. The senior citizen obviously felt embarrassed about what she had seen and found it awkward to tell. Her speech was halted

and her words almost whispered, but she persevered, and bit by bit the story came out.

Weed and Seed is a U.S. Department of Justice-sponsored program that helps areas particularly hard-hit by crime to create their own neighborhood programs to combat it. The "weed" part refers to getting rid of the criminals, and the "seed" part means replacing the criminal activity with beneficial, legitimate programs. The Atlanta Police Department's Weed and Seed unit handles the weeding part, making arrests and working with the Fulton County District Attorney's office to shut down problem businesses and condemn properties that provide havens for pimps and drug dealers.

The seeding part comes with funding community initiatives.

The program is not flush with cash.

Karen Rogers, who oversees it for the City of Atlanta, says this year there is maybe \$142,000 to be had in the form of a grant for English Avenue and Vine City neighborhood groups.

But money is not the area's primary problem.

According to Ivory Lee Young, who represents them on the Atlanta City Council, English Avenue and Vine City get more government money than any other neighborhoods in Atlanta. They have received more than \$23 million in public funding in recent years. The problem for the two pockets, situated less than 10 minutes from City Hall, is one of how the money is spent—and it is a crucial problem for an area that is beyond blighted, an area whose residents are literally begging for help. More than a dozen residents turned out at a

City Council meeting on Aug. 17 to ask for more police officers, more programs for youth, and some way to get working families into the abandoned houses that fill block after block.

What English Avenue and Vine City need, according to its residents, are better oversight of government money and some way to punish the absentee landlords who allow their empty properties to be used as brothels, drug dens and storage houses for burglars.

## THE MONEY

Councilman Young can handily list all the sources of money devoted to English Avenue and Vine City—and there are many.

There is the Northyards Business Park Improvement Fund, which takes a portion of the money earned from the office park

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"I would find that very hard to believe," says 55-year-old computer programmer Imain Mohammed, when informed that more than \$23 million has been spent to help his neighborhood.

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where Bauder College is located and infuses it into English Avenue. The fund is overseen by Antioch Baptist Church North, which boasts a \$4.5 million annual budget and runs the Bethursday Development Corporation.

Bob Jones, the head of Bethursday, failed to return calls for this story. However, the church's Web site states the following:

"In addition to the ultra modern,

Courtyard at Maple apartment development and reinvests it in Vine City.

There's the Urban Residential Finance Authority (URFA), which has shelled out more than \$10 million to the area over the past 20 years. That includes the Georgia Dome Housing Trust Fund—the dome is just on the southern edge of the area.

"When they built it, they created a fund of tax infusion to make housing in the area more affordable," says Young. A portion of the Georgia Dome profits are put in a re-

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—City Councilman Ivory Lee Young

multi-million dollar worship center which was dedicated in 1991, the church campus includes a bi-level administrative complex, a large formidable business plaza that houses the offices of the Antioch Urban Ministries, a community computer center, and the membership orientation facilities, four major parking lots, and a multi-functional Youth Center and adjoining recreational green space for outdoor activities. Dr. [Cameron Madison] Alexander [the church's minister] has organized the Bethursday Development Corporation to manage building development and other investment opportunities of the Antioch Congregation. In late 2003, construction began on the church campus for a 261 unit apartment building."

There's the Parcel 25 Trust Fund, which takes a small percentage of earnings from the

volving loan fund to be invested in English Avenue and Vine City.

The Westside Tax Allocation District (TAD), managed by the Atlanta Development Authority, also includes both neighborhoods. On Aug. 17, it made \$2.8 million available for capital improvement projects only.

"No programs and no administrative costs," says TAD's program manager Tarnace Watkins. "Sticks, bricks and mortar only."

In 2005, the Westside TAD dispersed almost \$14 million to English Avenue and Vine City.

The federally funded Title 20 empowerment zone has allocated \$5.8 million for the area.

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A house in English Avenue with the walls separated from the foundation.

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A Weed and Seed resource audit found that between \$4 million and \$5 million in funding was dispersed into English Avenue and Vine City in 2008 alone.

The residents, however, are skeptical that the money has made it into the neighborhoods. And if it has, they ask, where has it been used?

The corner of James P. Brawley Drive and Kennedy Street is, according to the APD's Weed and Seed unit, the epicenter of the area's heroin traffic and prostitution. No less than 39 percent of all violent crimes in the English Avenue and Vine City areas happen within a quarter-mile of the intersection.

In daylight, it looks more impoverished than dangerous.

There's a MARTA bus stop across from a corner convenience store, the empty stone shell of what used to be St.

Mark's African Methodist Episcopal Church, and a row of mostly uninhabited—and probably uninhabitable—houses. At the bus stop, 55-year-old computer programmer Imain Mohammed, who works in Buckhead, is waiting with a half-dozen others. He has lived in English Avenue all his life.

I ask him if he is aware of the more than \$23 million that has been spent to help his neighborhood and Vine City. He is not.

"I would find that very hard to believe," he says, surveying the street where boarded-up houses are visible in every direction, some with enormous piles of reeking garbage spilling out of their doorways.

He says the problem with housing in English Avenue and Vine City is that when developers get funding from the city, they use

it to build houses which they try to sell for \$200,000 or \$300,000.

"And that's in an area where the highest income is basically \$50,000," he says. "These people can't afford that. Most of them don't own their homes anyway."

Mohammad is one of the few who do, but he explains that it was left to him by his mother. He motions to what used to be a complex of efficiency apartments, now utterly abandoned, overgrown and littered. Many, he says, are owned by people who don't live in the area.

"I'd call them slumlords," he says. "At one time, if they didn't keep up their property, the city actually took it from them. But the city doesn't do that anymore."

Behind him is a man dressed entirely in orange, who repeatedly asks himself or anyone else who will listen

"Are you with Scotland

Yard?" before bursting into an impromptu song and dance, settling down into quiet, and then jerking into action again, over and over.

Mohammad ignores him and indicates the boarded-up houses on Kennedy: "They are trying to rent houses here for \$900. They say it's because of the view of Atlanta's skyline, but you can't even see the skyline from here."

He turns toward the south end of Brawley, where a tiny smidgen of a distant high-rise roof can be seen peeking out from behind a tree. "Who is going to rent here for \$900?" he asks.

Bryhem Wright, a customer service representative for Sears, who is also waiting at the stop, says the majority of what appear to be empty houses are actually occupied by home-

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**"Heroin is a big issue."**

—Lt. Tony Crawford, who oversees the APD's Weed and Seed unit



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less people—with drug dealers and prostitutes among them.

Kimani King, the Fulton County D.A.'s liaison to Weed and Seed, points out that the overall atmosphere of abandonment encourages drug trafficking.

"We've learned that drug markets exist because the areas allow it," he says. "So you have to target property owners who allow it."

So far, he admits, his office hasn't prosecuted anyone in relation to the English Avenue and Vine City Weed and Seed target area, but it will soon.

**THE PROBLEM**

According to Councilman Young, only about 15 percent of the area's houses are owner-occupied.

When The Sunday Paper visited the area last week, it looked as though only about 15 percent were occupied at all—or at least, occupied in any kind of official way. The doorway of one mostly boarded-up apart-

ment building on Griffin Street was more than knee-deep in garbage. While I took a photo, something inside stirred. A stone's throw away, a fence behind the only overtly occupied house on that side of the block is brightly painted with inspirational phrases. Near its bottom, above shattered bottles, are the words "Pray For Us."

**"I know the city's code enforcement officers are looking for them, but they are like ghosts."**

—Karen Rogers, director of Atlanta Weed and Seed, on negligent property owners

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Young, in a phone interview, explains that, for the most part, the Neighborhood Planning Unit determines which organizations will administer public funding.

"And there is a due diligence process to make sure the funds are spent properly," he says. "I speak with a great deal of pride when I say that we have used TAD money in an expansion of the neighborhood health center."

TAD money is spent according to the direction of the Westside TAD Advisory Board, whose members, Young says, are selected by "stakeholders" in the community.

"With all of these funds, there has always been an effort to partner with the community," he says. "But as a city government, we are always in jeopardy of discovering that a group really does not possess the capacity they presented to get funding."

Some funding has been forfeited. There have been defaults.

Even the small amount of funding available from Weed and Seed doesn't always hit the mark. The Vine City Civic Association, for example, defaulted and is ineligible for further funding. Weed and Seed's Rogers says the group received about \$20,000, and

though it put most of the money to good use, it ultimately failed to carry out initiatives it was supposed to fund. Linda Adams, a member of the civic association, attended the Weed and Seed meeting specifically to find out who would now be getting Weed and Seed's money. She admits her group defaulted, but she believes government money that comes into her neighborhood tends to repeatedly end up in the same individuals' hands: the same people operating under the guise of different organizations.

According to information from the Weed and Seed office, from January to July of this year, as compared with the same time period last year, homicide and rape more than doubled in English Avenue, and total violent crime in Vine City increased by 29 percent.

"Heroin is a big issue," says Lt. Tony Crawford, who oversees the APD's Weed and Seed unit. "It has been there for many years. Its stubbornness comes from the fact that it is so well-known as a heroin area. People come in from outside to buy."

Weed and Seed sets up roadblocks, but with so many empty houses, the heroin dealers and their customers have lots of places to hide.

This comes as no surprise to the residents, some of whom spoke at the Aug. 17 City Council meeting.

"I am the only homeowner on the street," a Sunset Avenue resident told the council, referring to foreclosures, evictions, and residents who have simply fled from the crime. "The entire block is empty."

Outside the council meeting, Councilman Young assured his constituents that the city is working with its lawyers to find and prosecute negligent absentee landlords. But "Able" Mable Thomas, the area's former state legislator, who was also present, loudly demanded that the city send public works crews, dump trucks and Bobcats—small, heavy equipment land-clearers—to demolish houses and clear lots.

"We want the landlords brought to justice," she says. "But this is a state of emergency. The rats will eat you alive, and the city will use 'bringing them to justice' as an excuse not to do something. Nobody would put up with this madness. The city needs to clean these properties and bill the owners."

But that's easier said than done. The first problem is finding the owners, as Weed and Seed officials can attest.

"I know the city's code enforcement officers are looking for them," says Rogers. "But they are like ghosts." **SP**