

Five years abuilding

Unfinished house fuels feud

Saxton, Anderson battle over eccentric structure that one neighbor has called a 'nightmare'

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The mud-spattered white garage has slipped from its peach-colored frame. The driveway has yet to be paved, and the house, a powder-blue mobile home flanked by plywood walls, is still incomplete five years after construction began.

The ramshackle dwelling at 518 S. Koneta Court (1030 East) has brewed neighborhood discontent, drawn city orders to stop building and fanned the flames of a long-smoldering feud between Salt Lake City Mayor Rocky Anderson and City Councilwoman Nancy Saxton.

Judy Schroeffer, who lives in a 1920s brick bungalow south of the unfinished house, summed it up this way: "It's been a nightmare."

She's spent \$20,000 trying - unsuccessfully - to thwart the development in court, she said. But now it's here, and the best she can hope for is that the house gets finished in compliance with city code.

Even then, it will stand out among the "quaint" and "cozy" homes on her street, where she's lived for 25 years.

In the past few months the peach-and-blue house has changed hands - from James Bean, a U.S. Navy veteran who launched construction, to Kent Whipple, owner of Whipple Plumbing.

Bean struggled for years to push the project through, but the city yanked his building permit after discovering the home didn't have water or sewer access under the privately owned lane. Not only that, the city said he failed to follow his building plans or create a legal subdivision for the lot.

Bean sued his neighbors and won the right to hook into water and sewer lines. And the city has negotiated a settlement agreement with Bean to drop two lawsuits, including one that named Saxton as co-defendant along with the city.

Under that deal, work can resume on the home if certain building codes are met. Of course, Whipple now owns the structure - and he couldn't be reached Wednesday for comment about his plans for the property.

Saxton, who represents the Koneta neighborhood, said the sale by Bean to Whipple spurred her to ask the city's building official, Orion Goff, "not to give one inch" in enforcing the building restrictions on the home's new owner.

Enter the mayor.

In a letter to Saxton earlier this month - *The Salt Lake Tribune* got it through an open-records request - Anderson accused her of "instructing a city official to treat a permit in a punitive, prejudicial manner." He also wrote that Saxton behaved "deeply contrary to the city's core values."

"You are not responsible for, and have no authority over, administrative functions," Anderson wrote.

In a voice message left for a reporter Wednesday, Anderson said Saxton has a "history" of interfering with city staff and "harassment, really reaching the point of abuse."

Saxton, who is running for re-election Nov. 6 against challenger Luke Garrott, denies the mayor's claim that she told Goff to apply the "harshest punishment" possible to the Koneta house.

"Rocky was not there for the conversation," she said. And she accuses Anderson of allowing work to continue even after it was deemed out of compliance.

Goff said he doesn't remember exactly what Saxton said to him. Another staffer relayed the conversation to Anderson after Goff discussed the encounter during a "confidential staff meeting," Goff explained.

He expressed irritation the conversation has become public. He doesn't want anyone to think the Koneta case is being treated differently than any other noncompliant structure, he said.

But he sympathized with Anderson's concerns about keeping the arms of city government separate.

"It really isn't appropriate for council members to try to influence our decisions" about enforcement, Goff said.

Saxton said she had to step in to fix the city's mess.

"This building never would have been built if the city had not misstepped and blown it all along for [five] years," she said. "I didn't want any excuses any more [about this problem] slipping through the cracks. I am an advocate for the residents of my district."

The neighbor, Schroepfer, is in Saxton's corner.

"She's the only one who's been able to help us," Schroepfer said, calling Anderson's letter a "cheap shot . . . She did her job more so than the people we pay in the city to do their jobs."

Anderson said he never authorized Bean to continue building. But a spokesman acknowledged the mayor did allow Bean to build a simple roof to protect the property from rain and snow. Otherwise, red flags on the property have remained in place.

Saxton "as usual [is] completely off base," Anderson said in an interview later Wednesday. "In my view, she's grandstanding for the neighbors rather than taking an intelligent and rational approach at solving problems."

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