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Walterboro is striving to become an even safer place

By William "Bill" Young

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Some of you may have been hearing about incidents in Walterboro in the past, and it's my hope to offer information and insight into what we're doing to tackle the "crime" issue. The city is currently taking significant measures to reduce the number of crimes that plagued us for a brief period in the past, and it's working. We want to be sure that Walterboro, with its historic charm, rich natural resources that surround, and reputation for warm Southern hospitality, remains a desirable and safe place to live, play, work and, yes, continue to visit.

Despite the understandable alarm that results from such a series of events we witnessed in 2009, the city of Walterboro remains a safe place. Yet we are very aware of the situation and are aggressively dealing with it. We are working to address the causes and are making a diligent effort to prevent them in the future. We are also working very hard to ensure that those responsible are held accountable. This should help bring closure to these events and hopefully reduce the probability of such events recurring in the future.

To help turn things around, it takes everyone in the community and those nearby who care about the entire Lowcountry area and do not want to see it marked or unfairly labeled, due to the information about the situation, in some cases, having been exaggerated or magnified.

It's important to note that while the city itself has witnessed a slight increase in the number of crimes committed in the past year, violent crimes actually peaked in 2007 and have declined ever since. The city is currently taking measures to continue to reduce the number of overall crimes in the area.

Recognizing that any level of crime is not acceptable, we have developed a comprehensive, 10-point plan to counteract these issues:

- Continue and improve community policing by cross-training and adding additional public safety officers.
- Encourage and support crime watch groups and enlist help from the citizenry.
- Reinstate the night field interview program.
- Work for neighborhood improvement through code enforcement to address blight and property abandonment.
- Partner with the sheriff's office and the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division (SLED) set to be located within Walterboro (a move unrelated to the spate of crime).
- Partner with SCE&G for improved lighting in high crime areas.
- Work with the Legislature to support legislation aimed at reducing crime and getting repeat offenders off of the streets.
- Partner with the Colleton Ministerial Alliance, the schools, the Department of Juvenile Justice, and continue with the Gun Buy Back Program.
- Tap the City of Walterboro Youth Advisory Commission as a resource for outreach programs aimed at at-risk youth.
- Partner with Colleton County Council to address issues countywide.

With the community and the media's help, we will get the facts out, and we will communicate the reasons for keeping Walterboro on your list of day trips, side trips and even, yes, overnight visits. Come take a seat on the front porch of the Lowcountry, and rest easier knowing that city officials, in partnership with law enforcement, key

community partners, our legislators in Columbia, and each and every citizen, will not allow negative labels to become attached to this beautiful place we are still proud to call home.

It is our belief that with everyone's help, we will be successful, and will return a sense of safety and community to those who live here and to those who visit the many attractions and treasures that make this a special part of the Lowcountry.

Some of you are already aware of our efforts and have witnessed the return to normal first hand, including those who turned out in record numbers at the annual Rice Festival, hailed by local media as one of the best in years. Or maybe you witnessed the throngs who lined Main Street April 28 into the wee hours for the eighth annual Walterboro Downtown Criterium bicycle race, part of the USA Crits Speed Week Series.

If you didn't, there's always next year, but for now, I wanted to share what we are doing to ensure that Walterboro is not only a safe place, but also a city we are be proud to call home. We hope you'll come back and see for yourself real soon!

William "Bill" Young is mayor of Walterboro.