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To Fair Lawn owner it's home, to neighbors it's a 'dump'

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FAIR LAWN — For decades, Lee Albert has been fighting with his neighbors and officials over whether his property is an eyesore, or worse, and whether he is a scofflaw.

For as long as he has lived on Hartley Place, Albert says, he has been fighting the borough over fines for property-maintenance violations that now amount to tens of thousands of dollars.

And last week, Albert, 65, was arrested twice because of issues related to his home — a structure the borough has deemed unsafe — and his unwillingness to pay the fines.

Some neighbors say that for years, the home has been a "dump" and a "junk yard," with the lawn unkempt and with various vehicles — including a small plane and a boat — stored there. The Fair Lawn Police Department said Albert has had several brushes with the law over the years. And at least one woman who had stayed at the Hartley Place residence was arrested on drug and burglary charges, to which she pleaded guilty and was sentenced to three years in jail, according to Superior Court records.

The borough declined to comment on Albert's case.

The 18 pending property-maintenance summonses against Albert — largely for failure to cut the grass, excessive weeds and accumulated debris on the property — are only a fraction of the complaints that the building department has filed against him over the years. He owes more than \$31,000 in fines for 24 outstanding violations dating from 2012, said Beth Brown, the Fair Lawn Municipal Court's violations clerk, though at one point he owed the town as much as \$160,000. Albert said that a judge reduced the amount and he had paid back a fraction of the fines.

A judge will decide how much more he owes for the 18 pending violations, Brown said.

"I'm not paying it," Albert said of his current violations. "It's ridiculous."

Albert said the property is currently clean. "There's nothing there to clean up. It's clean," he said.

Neighbors, however, said that for years it was not kept that way, and most neighbors on the quiet, mostly residential street, said that they were aware of Albert's legal troubles.



VIOREL FLORESCU/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Lee Albert was arrested twice last week related to violations at his Hartley Place home.

Edward Rodriguez, who has lived next door with his family for 19 years, said he has been coping for years with the unsightly property, Albert and the people Albert had brought to the home — who one neighbor described as "undesirables." Rodriguez and other neighbors said it seemed that Albert has come back to the property, even after the town condemned it, and he has been arrested several times.

"It's not fair for the people who are living here," Rodriguez said.

Albert said that he had been very ill for years with parasites he contracted while traveling in Asia. He said that during that time, he could barely walk, let alone mow the lawn. He added that at the time, he did not have the money to hire anyone to fix the place.

"I couldn't maintain the property," Albert said.

Bright yellow signs that the borough has posted outside the house forbid trespassing. The outside stairs appeared cracked and the lawn had leaves and weeds on it last week. Some siding on the house is missing, and there is scrubbed-out red spray paint on the front that neighbors said was graffiti.

Last Tuesday, Fair Lawn police arrested Albert — after an officer recognized him at a Dunkin' Donuts — because there was a warrant for his arrest for missing a court date related to property-maintenance summonses over the summer.

Albert said he was seeking medical treatment in Thailand at the time.

Soon after he posted bail, Albert was arrested again on charges of trespassing at his off-limits house in the middle of the night.

Albert said he went back to his house to change his clothing after he posted bail and left the Bergen County jail. The judge released Albert on his own recognizance and he is awaiting a municipal court hearing on Wednesday.

"They try to get me on everything," Albert said.

Albert said that when he returned from Thailand, he learned not only of the warrant for his arrest but also that the town deemed his house structurally unsafe — a move for which he said he never got a clear explanation.

"The structure is probably twice as strong as any other house," Albert said.

Albert said once the matter with the town is settled and he can clear his belongings from the property, he wants to sell it and leave the country. Albert said, however, that he has been trying to sell it for years without any movement.

"I'm going back to Thailand," Albert said. "I love it there. It's beautiful."

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