Litany of complaints, abundance of concern
Residents frustrated about a city they want fixed

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On Sangamon Street near the northern border of Harvey sit two crisp 1 1/2-story houses.

In the gray one, Ruth Cameron raised two daughters who went off to college. One came back and bought the blue one next door. Together, the women describe a growing list of frustrations.

They say the fire hydrant in front of their homes has been broken for years. The alley floods Ruth’s garage when it rains. And they say their complaints to city officials are ignored.

“It’s not just that nothing is ever done. It’s that they treat the residents as if we are a gnat flying around their head,” Ruth said.

The Camerons are among the residents of the once-stable blue-collar suburb who talk in sighs about troubles that they blame on far more than simply a poor town on hard times.

Over the past year, the Tribune has documented the south suburb’s woes as arguably the area’s most lawless community — with high violent crime, subpar policing and questionable cops. Town finances have been laden with insider deals, with little accountability demanded by state and federal agencies.

Since the 1980s, the suburb of 25,000 residents has struggled with crime, corruption and decay. But dozens of residents over the past year complain that the problems seem more acute.

They translate into headaches not seen in many other places: 911 calls that go unanswered, town water bills that mysteriously increase, garbage left to fester in alleys, vacant houses that litter neighborhoods and shelter criminals.

Residents wonder who would ever want to buy the homes in which they’ve invested years of payments and improvements.

They say they feel at the mercy of town leaders who either claim ignorance about key issues or refuse to answer questions citing a fear of being prosecuted.

And they say they wonder just what it will take for outside officials to do their part to ensure that the town reaches a basic level of solvency and justice.

‘Grab-and-go’

Teresa Cameron traces her frustration to the day orange-tinted water flowed along her street.

Harvey firefighters had come to test the rusty hydrant in front of her house, she said. At first, they couldn’t get it open. Then they couldn’t turn it off. When they stopped the gushing, they put an “out of service” tag on it. More than four years later, the faded red tag remains, along with a slow drip.

Teresa Cameron moved with her family to Harvey in 1977 and, as a kid, lived the suburban dream: a backyard to play in, a neighborhood in which to ride bikes. In 2008 she was living in Chicago’s Lakeview neighborhood when her mom called with an intriguing suggestion. The house next door was in foreclosure. Teresa bought it for $36,600.
Then came the hydrant break, she said, and an education on living in Harvey in the 21st century.

Harvey had rough-and-tumble politics long before the current mayor took charge in 2003. But Teresa Cameron said she was surprised about the extent of insider deals to the town comptroller, aldermen’s relatives and mayor’s son that the Tribune detailed this year.

“It’s a grab-and-go,” she said. “Let’s just loot the city, and do what we can ... and we could care less about what’s going on in Harvey.”

Some local officials say they were also kept in the dark on problems.

Meanwhile, the mayor and former town comptroller have refused to answer key questions in court depositions. Both have cited a constitutional right not to answer questions under a fear that the answers could be used to prosecute them.

When not under oath, Mayor Eric Kellogg has publicly blasted the Tribune. At a council meeting this month in the predominantly black suburb, Kellogg, who is black, referenced what he called the “strangulation, annihilation and castration of African-American men around the country” before suggesting that the Tribune was giving him a “public castration.”

Teresa Cameron isn’t persuaded. She said reporters must shed light on how poorly residents are treated — even put in danger, such as with her fire hydrant.

Experts say tapping into hydrants near homes is key to fighting fires and saving lives because firetrucks carry just a few minutes’ worth of water. Yet she said those at City Hall have simply shrugged.

Kellogg didn’t respond to questions on the hydrant, but Teresa Cameron said she confronted him when he visited the neighborhood this fall. She said he told her not to worry, the neighborhood had other hydrants.

Ignored until being robbed

The mayor visited the block because of what happened across the street to Teresa Cameron’s neighbors, Gil and Katy Williams.

The couple remember the day city officials and workers crowded their block, the day they told Gil how sorry they were for what happened to him, the day they quickly tore down a vacant garage and boarded up another.

“It was a ‘please me’ ordeal,” Gil recalled. “They’re trying to please me for what happened, by doing what we asked them to do before.”

Two days earlier, Gil was unloading his car inside his garage when a stranger put a gun to his head and told him to empty his pockets. The gunman sped away in the 71-year-old’s 2006 station wagon while the couple’s dog Breezy barked from inside their modest brick bungalow.

It was a longtime fear of the couple, who had regularly complained to city officials about the four abandoned garages along their alley. They worried that criminals could hide there, using them to prey on kids walking to school, or older residents using the alley to get to their garages.
Census estimates show Harvey has one of the area’s highest rates of vacant structures: about 1 in 4 residences. Residents and aldermen have long complained that little is being done to ensure that the salvageable ones are boarded up or rehabbed while the decrepit ones are torn down.

Katya, a retired teacher, had gone to a meeting of a regional advocacy group a few years ago that was protesting Harvey’s efforts at securing abandoned structures. The mayor’s administration has countered that it has addressed the issue.

Kellogg also showed, vowing to put his best detective on the case. The couple said they were pleased that police made an arrest this month. But they wish the suburb had shown that kind of effort before the robbery. With two of the garages taken care of, Katya, 69, feels it’s still too dangerous to go to her garage at night.

“I used to say, ‘I’m not going to let nobody run me out of my house.’ ... Things have gotten so bad now, that I’ve changed my mind.”

**Petty crime, petty response**

On a recent Saturday, on the other side of town, Mauzkie Ervin seethed as he rolled his big garbage can across four lanes of busy traffic.

It wasn’t that he had been a victim of a petty crime, he said, but lackluster policing.

Harvey’s law enforcement struggles are well-documented. The sheriff, at the invitation of the Town Council, is assessing a department where a 2007 raid by prosecutors and outside reviews in 2010 and 2012 documented valuable evidence left untested, shoddy detective work and lax supervision.

The mayor and chief argue that the department is well-run and reported crime is the lowest in decades. But the Tribune this year found that, when adjusted for the town’s declining population, the rate of crime is comparable to when Kellogg took office and declared a safety “state of emergency.”

Ervin, a 58-year-old delivery driver, is deeply critical of the police force. As an example, he tells the tale of his garbage can and the vacant house next door.

In May, he said, the home’s air-conditioning unit and copper pipes were stolen. Records show Ervin and a neighbor caught a man rolling away the pipes in Ervin’s garbage can.

Harvey police arrested the man, who lived two blocks away. Court records show he was sentenced to a year of supervision, a form of probation. Ervin said the vacant home’s owner reinstalled new pipe and a new air conditioner.

This month, Ervin said, the home’s air conditioner and pipes were again stolen. So was his garbage can. He said he told police of the suspiciously similar theft. The lead wasn’t mentioned in a police report.

Two days later, Ervin said, he drove by the probationer’s home, saw his can next to the man’s garage and called police. He hoped they would seek a search warrant to look for the stolen goods on the man’s property. But officers declined. So, with the can too small to fit into Ervin’s trunk, he said, he walked back to his house, dodging traffic on 159th Street.

Harvey’s spokesman did not respond to questions about the incident. Ervin said he suspects many residents have “given up” on calling police because too often “nothing is going to be done.”
Skeptical of federal efforts

Linia Thomas lives about a half-block from the mayor's home, on a wide corner lot in what was one of Harvey's most exclusive neighborhoods.

Her 85-year-old home, nicknamed the Gingerbread House, has a shake roof built in a wave pattern, above walls of stucco and patterns of exposed stones. On the lawn, lion statues guard carefully manicured trees and shrubs.

She and her husband bought the home in 1984 for $93,000. The average Chicago-area home has nearly tripled in value since then, but she thinks her home value dropped in that time.

She blames the drop not just on city leaders' questionable spending, but on outside agencies' refusal to embrace what little oversight exists of towns, particularly those whose neighborhoods are deteriorating, like hers.

For years, Harvey has broken a state law requiring that its books be audited. The law is supposed to protect taxpayers from having to bail out a town run into the ground. It's a rare safeguard in a state that gives many towns wide taxing power with little oversight.

But the state comptroller's office, under Democrat and then Republican control, failed to aggressively enforce the law. And Harvey became one of the worst offenders.

After the Tribune highlighted the failures in February, the state sent in auditors, but there remains no audited record of where Harvey's money went since April 30, 2009.

State officials have defended their efforts, saying they've sent records to "legal authorities." But to Thomas, the state failed Harvey's residents.

"They've got laws on the books to protect us innocent taxpayers, and they did nothing to see that the books were done," she said.

Federal regulators are also pushing for audits. Harvey now must report progress to a judge.

Thomas remains skeptical of federal efforts too. The FBI continues an investigation of town officials' actions, but Thomas pointed to a previous Tribune revelation that an undercover FBI agent helped re-elect the controversial mayor in 2007. The...
agent’s campaign efforts led to no charges. The FBI still won’t discuss it.

“There’s nothing to be hopeful for until I see some actual action,” Thomas said.

**Pushing for some change**

The suburb’s leaders did take some action — passing a budget — on a recent Monday night. But it came four months after a state law said it should have been passed. The town is still expecting to spend millions more than it takes in, with no explanation of how it can keep paying its bills.

Sitting in the audience, scribbling notes, was resident Allen Mahone.

He had moved as a kid to Harvey in 1945, when it had some dirt roads. Then it soon became an industrial powerhouse as factories sprang up. At 18, Mahone got a job at the plant making diesel engines.

He retired with a pension at 49, as the factories began to close and crime set in. He watched waves of middle-class families — first white, then black — move away.

But Mahone, now 77, isn’t ready to leave yet.

He formed the Har-V Community Coalition three years ago in his living room. Only one person came to his first meeting.

More than 40 attended the most recent potluck gathering in a church hall. Thomas, Ervin and Teresa Cameron were there. Mahone alternated tones of a teacher, preacher and sales manager. He praised the group for working for change. He chided them for not bringing pencils and paper to take notes. He handed out copies of articles detailing Harvey’s woes. He asked members to spread the word to at least three people.

“All we need is your participation and concern,” he told the group. “If that’s not the thing for you, that’s OK too. Because the motto is: Everybody doing just a little bit can get a whole lot done.”

He said the group isn’t endorsing specific candidates in April’s municipal election but is pushing to educate residents about core problems, such as the dire town finances.

Records recently obtained by the Tribune show the suburb’s leaders ignored years of warnings and spent the town deep into debt while scrambling to make payroll and avoid bouncing checks. Calling it a “crisis,” the previous comptroller suggested jacking up water rates, boosting fees on major employers, hiking property taxes and even charging mobile phone users a penny per text sent in Harvey. Little was done.

Now there’s a new comptroller. He’s preaching fiscal discipline. But there remains no plan for solvency.
Mahone wants the town to consider a little-known Illinois statute to spur state help in restructuring debt and trimming spending. But town leaders are lukewarm to outside intervention.

Mahone fears that the clock is running out on Harvey, and he may be forced to leave.

The mysterious water bill

Patricia Marshall said she doesn’t go to meetings. It makes her too angry when nothing happens. She didn’t go to the council meeting even after she was shocked by a recent water bill.

She normally paid less than $40 a month. But the bill demanded $1,200.

It was a particularly massive amount for Marshall. She had bought her 1,200-square-foot home three years ago out of foreclosure for less than $9,000. It offered a fresh start for the second-shift factory worker who had struggled with legal and financial problems.

She thought about trying to fix up the house but hesitated because she doubted she’d be able to recoup the investment.

And that was before the mysterious water bill arrived in the mail this fall.

She showed the Tribune past bills — denoting all were paid in full. When she complained to Harvey, she said she was told water workers had failed to properly record $1,200 worth of water she had used since she moved in.

Harvey spokesman Sean Howard said a faulty meter caused the city to undercharge her and the bill was for what she “legitimately” owed.

The suburb did not respond to Tribune requests for water records for Marshall and others getting such spikes in bills. That’s despite a state law requiring public bodies to provide records. It’s one of a string of failures to follow the law documented by the Tribune and the state attorney general. But, unlike in some states, there’s no criminal penalty for breaking the records law.

Marshall couldn’t wait for outsiders to help. She said the suburb offered her a deal mixed with an ultimatum: The bill would be cut roughly in half, but she’d have to start paying now or her water would be shut off.

She knows the irony: Her suburb gets the water from the city of Chicago and has been so late paying those bills that Chicago sued Harvey to get a $26 million judgment, which has yet to be paid. All the while, Chicago hasn’t threatened to turn off the water to Harvey.

But Marshall — just a regular citizen — said she felt she couldn’t risk losing her water service. So she agreed to pay an extra $20 per month until the mysterious debt is paid off.

“I guess they just do what they want to do to the people,” she said.