

Revitalization's success partly a matter of trust

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In the middle of a 62-block neighborhood in South Dallas, once a haven for drug dealers and prostitutes, kids played a pickup game of soccer on a lush field of grass.

Down the street, an ice cream truck rolled along, music jingling from its rooftop speakers. Nearby, a man scrupulously painted his frontyard fence.

Jubilee Park has come a long way since the ribbon was cut on new community and resource centers last September, a project oilman T. Boone Pickens made possible with a \$6 million donation.

Former Mayor Tom Leppert and Police Chief David Brown proclaimed the neighborhood an example for other revitalization ventures in the city.

After six months, the once-maligned neighborhood has never looked better.

But this is still a work in progress. There are still trust issues between residents and the Jubilee board. Crime has decreased significantly, but police are still working to clear out deep-set drug and gang problems. There is no shortage of future projects — and fundraising remains a challenge.

"We're busy here, thank goodness," said Tom Harbison, chairman of the Jubilee Park board of directors. "But our challenges are measuring the effectiveness of what we're trying to do and figuring out what to do next."

Establishing trust is a source of tension for many in the Jubilee community, which is about 70 percent Hispanic and 30 percent black. The relationships between police, residents, business owners and the Jubilee board of directors are constantly in flux.

"As one might gather, there are still people that don't quite trust us," Harbison said. "They think we have a hidden agenda, that we're going to build a highrise in the middle of the park."

The suspicions were there from the start. When the newly formed nonprofit, founded by St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church in North Dallas, was acquiring land to build the community center, some landowners were concerned their lots would be used for profit, especially after Fair Park purchased land nearby.

After the park and the community center were complete, and after the ESL classes and after-school program started, most residents realized they weren't being shoved out of the area. Now the programs are full, and the playground is always packed with kids.

Gurley Avenue resident Bonnie Skinner, 84, doesn't get over to the community center much, but said: "I know it's there if I need it. That's the important thing."

Vivian Garrett, who lives on Congo Street, two blocks from the community center, could only shake her head.

"I don't think it's for the community," said Garrett, 35. "They don't know how to talk to people over there."

The tension is natural for a neighborhood undergoing revitalization, said Tim Bray, director of the Institute for Urban Policy Research at the University of Texas at Dallas.

Bray said when an outside group gets involved, "there's a healthy amount of questioning" that happens.

"The key is keeping the community involved," he said. "Residents need to own their community in a bold and forceful way that sometimes these outside groups can give power to."

Harbison admits the board's communication with the community is not as good as it should be. But he said it will get better, and it's a top priority for Jubilee's community outreach director and new executive director, Emma Dawson.

"Transparency always helps," said Dawson, who joined Jubilee in January. "We want to make sure the community is involved. We have some, but we'd like to see bigger numbers."

Police presence

It used to be that it took police hours to respond to a call in Jubilee Park. By the time they showed up, the bad guys had fled.

The list of crimes committed was endless. Drug dealing. Prostitution. Burglary. Car theft. Gang violence. "It used to be terrible," said resident Berlean Sanders, 66.

Now, Dallas police are stationed in a resource center within the neighborhood. Beat officer Raymond Hailey said police patrol the streets for six or seven hours of their shift. Residents have their cellphone numbers.

Security cameras, linked to Dallas 911 centers, monitor problem spots 24 hours a day. Crime has been steadily going down, and, according to police department statistics, there was a 35 percent drop from 2009 to 2010.

The first obstacle police encountered when they started patrolling Jubilee in earnest wasn't the drug houses or the gangs: It was establishing a rapport with the neighborhood.

"It was really hard at first," said Hailey, who has been in Jubilee since January 2009. "They were scared to talk to us and didn't feel like they could trust us."

Now the residents recognize the faces that patrol their streets and tip them off on suspicious activity. Garrett said she sees the "bald police officer" doing rounds every day, and knows if she needs him, he'll show up.

The bald officer is Senior Cpl. Josh Merkel, another Jubilee beat officer. He normally patrols the neighborhood on a bicycle and greets people with a nod and a hello.

A routine patrol last week showed both the progress police have made and what they have yet to tackle.

People waved and smiled as Merkel rode by. He pointed out houses once rife with gang activity that have been cleared out. Major drug dealers, he said, have vacated the area.

Merkel also checked out an abandoned house on McKenzie Street, littered with clothes and garbage, where it was clear people used drugs and had sex.

He checked out the Barrymore Apartments on South Barry Avenue, where there's suspected gang activity. He responds to calls after dark about gambling and drunken brawls on Congo Street.

"Within the first couple months, we made a lot of arrests, and those people didn't come back," Merkel said. "But we're still working to get some things cleaned up."

Pending projects

Across the street from the community center, a banner that reads "Future Jubilee Senior Housing" is staked into an empty lot, where groundbreaking is expected this spring. Down the street, another banner says "Future Jubilee Early Head Start."

Residents of all ages are accounted for in future projects — an ever-expanding list, as the board learns what the community needs the most.

And what the board already has implemented has seen success. At 8:30 a.m., the community center hosts an exercise class. English as a second language classes and the afterschool program take place in the afternoon. There are senior bingo nights after the kids filter out. Students from the Hockaday School come on Saturdays to tutor.

While Harbison is focused on having buildings replace the banners for the senior duplexes and Early Head Start, he's also looking toward Jubilee's long-term success.

"Going forward, economic development is one thing we've got to strike," he said.

The businesses surrounding Jubilee include auto-repair shops, a few liquor stores and some gas stations — little that would entice people to make a trip there.

Harbison wants to attract restaurants to the area, along with a major grocery store, which the community is sorely lacking.

The biggest obstacle for making these goals materialize is, as usual, money.

Many members of the board and St. Michael are well-connected, and much of the construction work has been pro bono. But many of the projects cost millions of dollars and require a heavy fundraising effort.

A blueprint of the future Jubilee is being sketched, whether or not all of Jubilee's residents are on board. But most are grateful their neighborhood is safer and agree it's never been better.

"If anything has happened in the past year, I believe the community is starting to own this place," Harbison said. "That it's not just us white guys from North Dallas."

• **Caption: PHOTO(S):** 1. (Jim Mahoney/Staff Photographer) Melissa Salazar, 7, and others attend an exercise class at the Jubilee Park community center. The center was opened last September as part of the revitalization plan for the South Dallas neighborhood. 2. (Jim Mahoney/Staff Photographer) Dallas police Senior Cpl. Josh Merkel checks an abandoned house on McKenzie Street in Jubilee Park. Crime has decreased significantly in the neighborhood, but police are still working to clear out deep-set drug and gang problems. 3. (BULLDOG ed. p. 2B - Jim Mahoney/Staff Photographer) This house on Congo Street provides an example of property improvements in Jubilee Park. Much of the construction work has been pro bono. But many of the projects cost millions of dollars and require a heavy fundraising effort. **MAP(S):** (Staff graphic) DALLAS - Jubilee Park.

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