



Neighborhood around Washington Park showing new energy

By [Georgia Pabst](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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The Share Mobile Market truck pulled into the parking lot behind the apartment building at N. 39th St. and W. Lisbon Ave., and volunteers rushed to unload boxes of oranges, pears and cabbages and coolers filled with chicken and fish.

Within minutes, a big, empty room at the United Methodist Children's Services apartment building had been transformed into a market, part of the health and wellness plan to provide low-priced, quality food to residents in the Washington Park area, which is considered a food desert.

Nearby, workers in hard hats completed another day of construction on 24 apartments at N. 38th St. and W. Lisbon Ave. that UMCS is building. On the first floor, area resident Keith Holt plans to start Milwaukee Bicycle Works, an effort to bring bike and cycling programs to the neighborhood for transportation and health.

Around the corner on N. 39th St., new town houses are nearing completion. And an old boarded-up house and concrete building next door will be demolished to make way for an orchard.

Soon soccer will return to the park. Last fall there were three teams and this spring there will be five.

This was just one day's glimpse into the life of the Washington Park neighborhood. But it's an indication of what many describe as new energy to revitalize this neighborhood through a community approach guided by the Washington Park Partners plan.

Neighborhood action

It's the same kind of approach undertaken as part of the \$50 million, 10-year-Zilber Neighborhood Initiative in the neighborhoods of Lindsay Heights, Clarke Square and Layton Boulevard West Neighbors.

Under that approach residents, businesses, community agencies and others come together to outline a vision and goals, both long- and short-term. Committees have formed to implement the plans for housing, safety, education, jobs and business, arts and culture, health and wellness, and the 124-acre Washington Park, the center and jewel of the neighborhood.

The plan can also be used as a blueprint for developing and guiding investors and other partners, said Leo Ries, the director of the Local Initiatives Support Corporation, who is also involved in the Zilber initiative.

"In this neighborhood there's been a true sense of collaboration among neighborhood institutions and partners, such as the Urban Ecology Center, Our Next Generation, ACTS, the Progressive Community Health Center, businesses and the United Methodist Children's Society," he said.

UMCS, which has built, or is completing, 70 housing units, including 20 town homes, 34 apartment units and 16 transitional housing units, is the lead agency for the effort.

"Now that we have the plan, the real work starts of targeting specifics for implementation," said Perry Huyck, executive director of UMCS, who pitched in to unload the mobile market truck, a project of the health and wellness committee.

Like in so many other neighborhoods in the city, foreclosures have dealt a blow.

"We're still dealing with that and subsequent high levels of board-ups and vacancies, crime and a number of challenges," Ries said.

More than 10,400 residents - 79% African-Americans - live in the 145 city block area that makes up the Washington Park neighborhood. Unemployment stands at 20%.

A plan for the neighborhood was drawn up in 2004 and the new plan, in many ways, builds on that, Ries said.

"The first plan focused on development along North Ave. and a lot was accomplished," he said. "But a lot has changed. There are new people, new opportunities and new energy, so this plan needs to align people around a new reality."

Part of that new reality centers around housing in the neighborhood that was developed at the turn of the century around the park.

Habitat for Humanity built eight new houses in 2011 and will build 20 more in 2012 on vacant lots, said Tieg Whaley-Smith, the part-time director of the sustainable communities effort.

But while there have been fewer owner-occupied foreclosures here than the city average, there's a big need for rehabbing and finding new owners for vacant properties, he said.

One key partner in that effort is the Allied Churches Teaching Self-Empowerment. With a grant from the Harley-Davidson Foundation, ACTS hired a rehab manager to develop plans on how to fix up foreclosed homes and work with homebuyers.

ACTS has also established a microloan fund to make small, no-interest loans to help families purchase foreclosed homes, said Carl Quindel, the director of ACTS. "This is a very affordable neighborhood and we try to help families buy and negotiate the best possible deal," he said.

Pat Mueller lives and works in the Washington Park neighborhood and believes in its future. She's lived in the area since the late 1980s and owns a number of properties. In 2002 she rehabbed a rundown, turn-of-the-century, two-story building that had been a saloon during prohibition and later a corner grocery store.

Today, the first floor houses Eat Cake, a specialty cake shop run by Debbie Pagel, who lives upstairs. Other local businesses have bloomed in the area, such as the Amaranth Bakery and longtime stalwart

Kehr's Candies.

Mueller, who is active on the arts and culture committee, said a number of artists live in the area. She would like to see the arts fostered and developed as the area moves forward.

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