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Revitalizing cities from the inside

Tax credits increased in program requiring neighborhood input

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Erin Jones has seen her New Brunswick neighborhood transformed during the past 30 years.

Three generations of her family have witnessed tidy lawns on Suydam Street give way to weeds, well-kept houses fall into disrepair and the safe community become more dangerous.

But the change, she says, is more than what you can see. It's also what you can feel.

"Growing up here, everyone was friends. Now it seems nobody knows each other," the massage therapy student said.

Jones' house and her grandmother's place nearby are located in a 37-block area of mostly low-income residences. Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Metuchen is helping revitalize the neighborhood by bringing the community into the process. Residents even named the new project Unity Square.

Similar efforts are taking hold across the state. Nonprofit groups are at the foundation of the initiative, offering better social services and improved rental conditions to residents in distressed areas. And now there is an increased incentive for private investors to join the effort, under legislation signed recently by Richard Codey in his role as acting governor.

The legislation raises tax credits, under the Neighborhood Revitalization Tax credit program, from 50 percent to 100 percent for businesses that invest in neighborhood-based projects. The program requires contributions of \$25,000 to \$1 million per neighborhood annually for a maximum of four years.

"The intention of the program is to say there's a better way to make change in distressed areas," said Michael Powell of the Housing & Community Development Network. "You can't forget the government or private sectors. You have to make the deal sweeter for them."

The enticement has caught on in Elizabeth's E-Port section, Newark's Ironbound and Lincoln Park neighborhoods, Jersey City's Bergen Hill area and Asbury Park's Springwood Avenue district. Nonprofit organizations in those areas not only have received approvals from the state Department of Community Affairs for their neighborhood plans, but they also have convinced businesses like Wachovia and New Jersey Natural Gas to contribute to their cause.

Nonprofit group leaders say residents know their neighborhoods in ways developers never will. They've held years of community forums, urging residents to help shape a vision of what their area needs. Developers, they say, tend to look solely at profit potential.

"These residents aren't waiting for someone to fix their problems," said Baye Adofu-Wilson, executive director of the Lincoln Park Coast Cultural District in Newark, a nonprofit organization using participatory planning to transform one of the oldest sections of the city. "Developers didn't want to take the first steps because they believed the area was too poor and riddled with crime. So we put the two together."

More importantly, planners say residents shouldn't be pushed out because of new development.

"Will area residents be given a chance to own and manage new development in their neighborhoods as they change?" asked Bill Bajor, director of community and economic development at Women Rising Inc., the nonprofit group transforming the Bergen Hill area of Jersey City. "We want to make sure they'll have the opportunity."

Kiesher Harris, a community organizer and a resident of the Bergen Hill section for more than 10 years, said the group Women Rising held four years of sessions in which more than 140 residents brainstormed about their ideal neighborhood and local artists put pictures to their words. Harris said the process demonstrated the time a transformation needs to take shape.

"We have to grab hold of the concept and run with it. By getting the leaders of each block to understand the idea, we're getting residents to understand why it's better for them," Harris said. "Everyone wants the same things -- more trees, streetlights, police presence -- so we have to put together a comprehensive plan. It'll take time, but little by little, it'll work."

James Hughes, dean of the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, attributed the resurgence in urban revitalization to increased regulations on developers, such as open-space requirements and farmland and wetlands preservation.

"It's essential that you involve the community at an early stage because it's easier if they feel they have a stake in it, rather than alienating them," Hughes said.

The focus on New Brunswick's Unity Square revitalization has brought new hope for Jones about her community.

"You always hear about people wanting to change neighborhoods, but this project seems to have taken off," she said. "This really has potential. When people in the area want change and so do those with the money, it could work."

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