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## News

# Neighborhood group sets goals

By Abraham Aboraya | June 11, 2009

OVIEDO - In the Jackson Heights Middle School's teacher's lounge, about 10 residents from the Johnson Hill, Washington Heights and Round Lake Estates neighborhoods sat down for a little guided meditation.

The volunteer who ran the small group asked them to close their eyes and visualize themselves 10 years from now. Think about the community and what you want it to be.

Some closed their eyes for a bit. Others immediately began jotting down ideas on pieces of paper. Soon, the room was engulfed in the quiet, only interrupted by the steady hum of the Coke machine and the occasional, gentle rattle of the refrigerator's compressor kicking in.

Time's up. Soon, the large pieces of sticky paper taped to the concrete wall were filled with about 20 ideas for improving their neighborhoods -everything from more after-school programs and recreational programs for kids to having law enforcement crack down on drug dealers in the neighborhood.

"When the Bible says 'without a vision, people perish,' this is a vision," Detective Teddy Floyd of the Indian River County Sheriff's Department whispered after checking in on the room.

Thursday night was the first meeting of the ION program, which stands for Improving Oviedo's Neighborhoods. The pilot program is bringing together residents from the historically black, historically impoverished area of Oviedo with the hopes of transforming the neighborhoods.

What makes the program unique is that all the ideas are generated by citizens. More than 40 residents, mostly black, showed up to Thursday's meeting despite the nasty weather.

"It's a historically black neighborhood," said Oviedo City Councilman Keith Britton, who helped bring the program to Oviedo. "It has been neglected. There's really no simple way to say it. It is what it is."

After Thursday's meeting, Bryan Cobb, the director of Development Services for Oviedo, said the city now has about 100 ideas, and about 20 that are considered high priority.



Cracking Down: Detective Teddy Floyd of the Indian River County Sheriff's Department shows a photo of a torn-down crack house at the ION meeting.

A committee is working to categorize all of the ideas and work out the actual details of how to make the ideas come about.

"It runs the whole gamut from public safety to youth programs to recreation programs to beautification and stormwater," said Cobb, who's been working with Oviedo Police Chief Jeffrey Chudnow on the program. "We'll take the committee now and get them to work on ... taking these ideas and making them into an action plan."

Oviedo's ION program is based off of the PACE EH program: the Protocol for Assessing Community Excellence in Environmental Health. It's a mouthful, but the gist of the program is simple: anything that affects you is also affecting your environmental health.

And the idea is to get local politicians from all levels, private partners and the like to come together and identify the problems and fix them.

"We want to build trust in the community," Britton said. "They lost hope. They lost trust that their city government is there for them. This is an effort to try and bring that back, work on that relationship."

Before breaking off into smaller groups, residents heard from Julianne Price, with the Indian River County Health Department, and Floyd. Both worked together to clean up the West Wabasso neighborhood using the PACE EH program.

According to the 2000 census figures, West Wabasso had 115 residents (86 percent black) with a median household income of \$6,250, despite being a stone's throw from multi-millionaires.

"There was an evident lack of infrastructure in (West) Wabasso and a mistrust of government," Price told the residents Thursday. "Quite frankly, they were used to government officials coming in, doing assessments, promising them things, but nothing ever happening."

One of the first things residents prioritized was streetlights - they didn't feel safe leaving their homes at night. Within seven months, they had installed 44 new streetlights.

"Now if I had come in there as a government official, I would never have picked that issue," Price said. "It wouldn't even have been on my radar. ... But to Wabasso, that was the No. 1 issue. It was because they didn't feel safe."

Within two years, they had done \$1.5 million in improvements; they had demolished six homes (two were crack houses) and laid the groundwork for getting potable water to the area, described as a "place time forgot" by Cobb. Floyd went a little further, saying that West Wabasso had third-world conditions.

And the idea is that, with the ION program, the same type of success story can be replicated in Oviedo.

"That's what it's all about," Britton said. "It's trying to make the city government there for the citizens. Hopefully this will create a positive cycle. It's just as easy to create a positive cycle as it is a negative one."

Britton, a self-proclaimed child of the '60s, keeps a Robert Kennedy quote on his desk at work. It's from the June 6, 1966, Day of Affirmation speech to the National Union of South African Students in Cape Town, South Africa.

In that speech, Kennedy said that "Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

Britton read that quote to residents Thursday, almost 43 years to the day after Kennedy said it.

"It's all about hope," Britton said. "Next step, we're going to try and go into the implementation phase. ... That's what we want to see, just a tiny ripple of hope."