

**Rockford Choice Neighborhoods
Community Meeting Summary – July 26, 2012
Fairgrounds Valley Community Room**

Purpose: To establish a consensus-based vision to guide planning for the Ellis Heights/Fairgrounds neighborhood based on the issues, needs and strategic directions identified at previous Community and Task Force meetings. This meeting was intended to reach residents of the Fairgrounds Valley homes that had been previously unengaged in the planning process.

The meeting was organized into the following segments: 1) project background, 2) strategic initiatives, projects and priorities, 3) discussion and vision.

Project Background

Camiros Senior Associate Adam Rosa presented a recap of what has been learned through the previous community meetings and where we are in the planning process.

Strategic Initiatives, Projects and Priorities

Adam Rosa then introduced six strategic initiatives – 1) education, 2) focus on youth, 3) income and jobs, 4) engagement/capacity building, 5) safe, healthy neighborhood, and 6) physical improvements that have evolved through the previous meetings and existing conditions analysis. These strategic initiatives were suggested as the major organizing themes for the neighborhood vision and projects that will form the core of the Ellis Heights/Fairgrounds Choice Neighborhoods Transformation Plan.

Following this introduction, participants were encouraged to review the strategies and projects identified for each initiative and to add project ideas to the list developed at previous meetings. This was done in an open house format.



Fairgrounds Valley and Ellis Heights residents sign in and wait for the meeting



Residents add strategies and project ideas to the strategic initiative display boards

The strategies and project ideas developed at this and previous community and task force meetings are presented below. New strategies and project ideas suggested at this meeting are noted in italics.

Education

- Establish the value of education as a community mind-set.
- Bring reading and math literacy levels up to modern standards.
- Provide support systems that focus on education (daycare, transportation, mentoring).
- Stress the “ladders of career opportunity” model to ensure that residents can access jobs with a future.
- Provide opportunities for environmental education (community gardens, environmental park programming, Kent Creek nature programming).
- Create a culture that values achievement.
- Hold parents responsible for children’s school attendance; enforce truancy laws.
- *Kids should be able to go to a school that is closer to their home*

Project Ideas

- Expand available pre-GED and GED learning opportunities
- Create a neighborhood community learning campus that supports adult education and career development
- Parent education (home economics, home maintenance, life skills)
- Extend Lewis Lemon branch library hours
- Neighborhood public service house, like Focus House, to support truancy enforcement
- Community gardens along Kent Creek with paths, benches and “safe ways” into the water with community leaders/volunteers to teach gardening and creek studies
- Ezekiel’s Bread cooking program (life skills)
- *Afterschool activities and sports*
- *Tutoring for kids in the community*

Focus on Youth

- Improve access to existing youth programming.
- Provide positive role models and mentors.
- Provide comprehensive youth guidance (home, school, and neighborhood).
- Pursue long-term youth engagement.
- Use creative/diverse youth engagement opportunities (community gardens, church groups, park district/sports programs).
- Emphasize education.
- Provide incentives for children doing the right things as they progress on taking steps to overcome their adversities.
- Make community service programs and youth sports more accountable for academic performance and participation (if you don’t go to school, you can’t come to the afterschool program or play the game).
- *Better learning curriculum*

Project Ideas

- Creative programs in writing, art, music and social skills
- Tutoring facilities at Lewis Lemon School

- Child care centers
- Nature study program focused on creek
- “Fun Bus” program
- Public waste cans decorated by local kids
- Volunteer bike repair program
- Full service health and wellness facility with programs for youth and families
- Splash pad park for kids
- Alternative to Harkins Pool for swimming
- More “positive” activities for youth and children
- *A zoo*
- *Programs for troubled teens*

Income & Jobs

- Focus job training on career pathways that lead to jobs with a future.
- Encourage entrepreneurship.
- Improve access to employment and support services.
- Improve job access for returning felons.
- Identify job opportunities for people without a high school diploma or GED.

Project Ideas

- Clothing exchange
- Commercial laundry
- Handyman/landscaping training & business development
- Food co-ops & flea markets
- Landscaping businesses staffed by neighborhood residents
- Mobile bank or credit union
- Mobile community services trailer
- Certification program for returning felons (job readiness/reliability)
- Child care
- Community lending/alternative small business loans (micro-lending)
- West Side employment office
- *A clothing closet closer to home*

Community Engagement/Capacity Building

- Provide activities that encourage intergenerational interaction.
- Establish collaborative partnerships among service providers to support the neighborhood’s Vision.
- Encourage more owner-occupied housing to create a more stable neighborhood.
- Build on the assets and resources that people already have (like neighborhood day care, auto repairmen, etc.) to add validation to what already exists.
- Encourage attendance at neighborhood meetings

Project Ideas

- Neighborhood block parties
- Neighborhood clean-up events
- Neighborhood garden walks
- Homeownership incentives to bring teachers, police and fire personnel and entrepreneurs to become new Ellis Heights residents

- Entrepreneurship coaching, training
- Neighborhood investment pool
- Neighborhood resource guide
- Homeownership classes
- Welfare cheats (catch/prosecute?)
- Door to door invites
- Neighborhood newsletter
- Mobile community church
- Youth basketball program
- *An arts and crafts center*

Safe, Healthy Neighborhood

- Reduce violence.
- Provide services to support healthy lifestyles (drug rehabilitation, ex-offender services, domestic violence programs, neighbor-based health care).
- Bring more healthy food and nutritional services to the neighborhood, including a full-service grocery store, if not in the Ellis Heights neighborhood then on the west side of Rockford.
- Increase neighborhood watch participation.
- Install and maintain cameras at bad intersections.

Project Ideas

- Continue the “Fun, Safe Summer” initiative
- Supportive services for returning ex-offenders
- Mentoring programs for at-risk youth
- Youth and parent life skills training
- Conflict resolution training
- Full service health and wellness facility for youth and families that includes a 6-lane running track
- Entertainment for teenagers and young adults that fosters positive interaction and options
- Senior citizen housing
- Teaching young ladies and young men
- Cooking classes
- Community gardens on vacant lots
- Soup kitchen for donations

Physical Environment

- Build upon the West State Street Corridor Improvement Project to establish a ‘Green Network.’
- Improve year-round pedestrian, transit and bikeway links to the downtown and other destinations.
- Improve the quality and variety of the neighborhood housing stock.
- Engage landlords and property owners in improving the quality of rental housing.
- Make banks accountable for maintaining foreclosed properties.
- Improve public infrastructure (street lighting, sidewalks).
- Engage in community policing through environmental design.

- Provide properly zoned locations for commercial development.
- Complete the neighborhood sidewalk network by adding sidewalks where there are none or where they are missing due to deterioration (from keypad polling discussion, see below).
- Emphasize improving housing condition; then focus on sidewalk improvements (from keypad polling discussion, see below).
- Consider selective removal of Fairground Valley Apartments and rehabilitation of the remainder as a financially feasible approach to reducing density and providing quality rentals.

Project Ideas

- Demolish vacant and deteriorated buildings
- Neighborhood community use campus
- Neighborhood bike path system
- Right-of-way landscaping at key locations
- Build new housing
- Increasing awareness of available City programs (sidewalk replacement)
- Build an athletic facility that can be used by local schools and youth; can generate year-round income and create jobs
- Add more buses to allow more frequent transit service
- Andrews Street sidewalk repair
- Litter, clean-up campaign
- Add lighting along Avon and Kent Creek
- Improve the neighborhood
- Improve sidewalks
- *Improve the creek*
- *Install a pedestrian light on the bridge*
- *Better transportation to schools*

Before reconvening as a group, meeting participants were provided with \$15,000 in “Ellis Heights/Fairgrounds Neighborhood Bucks” and asked to allocate dollars among the strategic initiatives in accordance with their importance. This priority ranking exercise produced the following results, which are compared with the results from the June Community and Task Force meetings:



Residents prioritize the strategic initiatives by spending their Ellis Heights/Fairgrounds Neighborhood Bucks



Strategic Initiative	July 26 th Community Meeting		June 26 th Community Meeting		June 27 th Task Force Meeting	
	Dollars Allocated	% of Total	Dollars Allocated	% of Total	Dollars Allocated	% of Total
Income & Jobs	\$312,000	39%	\$97,000	23%	\$57,000	20%
Education	\$126,000	16%	\$75,000	18%	\$54,000	19%
Safe, Healthy Neighborhood	\$114,000	14%	\$86,000	20%	\$59,000	21%
Physical Improvements	\$111,000	14%	\$73,000	17%	\$50,000	18%
Focus on Youth	\$101,000	13%	\$58,000	14%	\$38,000	13%
Engagement/Capacity Building	\$34,000	4%	\$31,000	7%	\$27,000	9%
Total	\$798,000	100%	\$420,000	100%	\$285,000	100%

Discussion and Neighborhood Vision

Camiros Senior Associate Adam Rosa then led the group through a general discussion about issues and alternatives with a focus on each of the strategic initiatives. The discussion included the following feedback from neighborhood residents:

Education

- Parents need to know how their children are doing in school.

Focus on Youth

- Neighborhood children need better supervision.
- The youth need places to go so that they don't get into trouble (all age groups).
- Youth activities need to be affordable (may need to involve volunteers).
- We need a better partnership with the Park District to have more activities within the neighborhood.
- Parents need to know where their kids are at all times – responsibility starts at home.
- More sports programs, along with drama and dance classes would be great to have.

Income & Jobs

- Everything hinges on income, jobs and education.
- We need more businesses in the neighborhood so there are more local opportunities.
- We need better public transportation, including shuttles to job centers.
- We need to bring employment to the neighborhood.

Community Engagement/Capacity Building

- We need more community partnerships.
- Fairgrounds Valley residents want to be part of the vision... it needs to be inclusive of all income groups.
- We need more family activities.

Safe, Healthy Neighborhood

- We need access to meat, there are no walkable places to get basic groceries in the area.
- We need to solve safety issues so people can walk across the bridge at night.

- There are issues with wild animals in the neighborhood, including animals getting into trash cans.
- Major crime issues are brought in by people outside of Fairgrounds Valley.

Physical Environment

- Fairgrounds Valley is divided into the east and west by the creek / railroad tracks.
- Trucks need a gate/crossing at railroad. The railroad also needs a stronger/higher fence to keep kids off of the tracks.
- We need to fix the gate at the creek.
- We need to clean up the creek.
- There are no mailboxes to send letters in the vicinity.
- New housing should be organized around parks so residents can look out for each other's kids.
- Single-family houses on scattered sites are seen as desirable for new development.
- Garages and backyards are desirable.
- Fairgrounds Park could be improved by adding a football field, jump roping area, more picnic shelters, benches and garbage containers.
- New sidewalks are necessary by the bridge for pedestrians.
- New sidewalks should connect with West State Street improvements.
- We should put all of our funds into physical improvements because it will transform the image and identity of the neighborhood and get people feeling better about their environment.
- A positive neighborhood image is needed to attract private investment.
- The intersection of School and Kilburn would be the best location for new commercial development.
- A grocery store and telephone booths would be welcome in the neighborhood.
- A Boys and Girls Club or community center would be great additions to the neighborhood.
- Residents want to make sure that they have the ability to come back into a redeveloped Fairgrounds Valley.

The following draft vision statement, which will continue to be refined as the plan is developed, was presented for consideration:

OUR VISION

The Ellis Heights neighborhood is a nice place to live! It is safe, affordable, clean and pleasant. There is strong homeownership, with respectful and responsible neighbors looking out for the welfare of others. It is a community where children are nurtured, families can grow, and seniors can enjoy their years. Ellis Heights is a responsible community, with active leadership and strong institutions.

Our priorities for improving neighborhood quality of life are:

- *Income and jobs, the catalysts for making progress on other initiatives*
- *Creating a safe, healthy neighborhood for families with an emphasis on our youth is paramount*

- *Education and physical improvements*
- *Neighborhood engagement and capacity building*

Our design desires for Ellis Heights are:

- 1. Treat the neighborhood as a series of distinctive areas.*
- 2. Help people improve their homes.*
- 3. Emphasize sidewalk improvements generally, but specifically focus on building connections between the West State Street corridor pathway system and the neighborhood sidewalk system, filling in the sidewalk gaps where they exist.*
- 4. Focus commercial development near the West State and Central intersection with an emphasis on a full-service grocery that includes banking, pharmacy, restaurant and similar uses within the facility or commercial cluster.*
- 5. New mixed-income housing development should be scattered throughout the neighborhood to balance the population and character of the neighborhood. Concentration of such housing is not desirable.*
- 6. To make the most of our resources to improve the quality of our neighborhood, we should balance our investments between reinforcing the quality areas, but perhaps placing a bit more emphasis on investing in redeveloping those blocks under the most stress.*

Meeting participants were in agreement that this vision captured their desires for the future of the Ellis Heights/Fairgrounds neighborhood. Fairgrounds residents reiterated that the vision needs to be inclusive for all income groups and that RHA need to be part of the vision.

Ron Clewer Interim RHA Director, thanked people for coming and encouraged them to continue to participate in the planning process and to take advantage of the activities and resources being provided to RHA and neighborhood residents.



RHA Interim Director Ron Clewer closes the community visioning session by encouraging residents to become more involved in the planning process and neighborhood programs and activities