

PRIDE'S BUILDING BLOCKS

'PROMISING' PLAN FOR BALTIMORE'S NEIGHBORHOODS WILL GET A HARTFORD TRIAL

BY OSHRAT CARMIEL | COURANT STAFF WRITER

BALTIMORE — The 2800 block of Pelham Avenue has its own paper of record. Printed in the home of Jim Duffy and Jill Jasuta, it's filled with these need-to-know tidbits: The crazy roof raccoon has been captured! Dumpster Day is almost here! The blockwide painting party has been postponed (blame the rain)!

This is news fit to print for residents of this block of 90 identical row houses, a place where being civic-minded is not just the right thing to do, it's a survival strategy.

Here is a block that arranged for its porch lights to flicker on simultaneously at dusk, a place where the neighbors celebrate street-sweeping with cups of hot cocoa. It is a quarter-mile-long road where Jasuta, picking up trash on an ozone-alert summer afternoon, was offered a bowl of pasta by a man across the street.

Such is life on a "target block," a place selected by community leaders in northeast Baltimore as a starting point for the renaissance of the Belair-Edison neighborhood. And it is a model for what Hartford Mayor Eddie A. Perez envisions for his city as part of his ambitious homeownership initiative.

Perez and a team of real estate experts plan to designate up to 12 "Pride Blocks" this year and four clusters of "Rising Star Blocks" in Hartford, and do unto them what Baltimore did to its target blocks: infuse them with money, attention and low-interest loans, and spruce them up to become beacons of neighborhood pride.

But for the plan to work, one other thing needs to happen: Neighbors need to know their neighbors, plan things with their neighbors — and, if all goes well, like their neighbors.

"The operations committee isn't going to fund a project that doesn't have fun built into it," said David Boehlke, Perez's homeownership consultant, speaking to a group of Hartford residents. "If you want to move your block up the list of priorities, show us the fun."

The theory behind "the fun" is this: that no amount of code enforcement or government loans or subsidized home-building can elevate a neighborhood the way resident interest can. That the only way to make a block look cared for is to get its residents to care.

Caring, in this case, is different from the usual strategy of Hartford community organizing. This is not about banding together to demand better city services and more police presence, Boehlke said.

It's about collectively agreeing to remove the rotting tree stumps from the front yards, to fix the dented chain-link fences, or just plant flower beds.

The hope is that these small, blockwide, city-funded projects will create a momentum of home improvement, making residents want to stay and to recommend living there to friends and co-workers.

This should create a buzz about the neighborhood, making would-be homeowners consider buying there.

"Where people derive their confidence is from the behavior of their neighbors," says Charles Buki, another of Hartford's homeownership consultants. "And where people develop a lack of confidence is from the behavior of their neighbors."

Only 25 percent of Hartford's residents own their homes, a rate that is second-lowest among U.S. cities. Consultants say the problem is not that there aren't enough homes to buy in Hartford, but that there isn't enough demand to buy among people with the means to do so.

The people who already live on a block are the best ones to help create that demand, the theory goes. The only way they can credibly do that is to synchronize.

"If I had a beautiful garden and all my neighbors didn't cut their grass, would my house be worth much?" says Megan Coylewright, a medical student who owns a row home on another of Belair-Edison's target blocks in Baltimore. Her block holds cleanup days and is about to hold a blockwide gardening party.

"If you drive down this street and you see the [well-groomed] front yards and the gardens, you think the homes are worth more," she said.

Blockwide civic involvement is nothing new. Community gardens, basketball tournaments and cleanup days are about as old as some of Hartford's real estate. But rarely has such involvement been enforced — as a way to resurrect real estate values and revive the appeal of a neighborhood.

SAVING 'MIDDLE' STREETS

In Hartford, as in Baltimore, the chosen blocks and neighborhood sections will not be places now popular with home-buyers. Nor will they be the blocks that are most distressed. Consultants are seeking areas "in the middle," streets with a sizable number of homeowners, with homes that could use a little sprucing up, in neighborhoods that are in danger of "tipping" into disrepair.

"If I feel that my mother can be in the neighborhood that I'm in at 7 at night, then I can work with that neighborhood," Buki said.

Consultants spent weeks driving through Hartford's streets and poring over population, income and real estate data, looking for decent places that could be made into great places. They also looked for some evidence of social cohesion.

Based on the data, the mayor and his team will designate four so-called Rising Star Blocks by the end of the summer. People on those block clusters will have access to \$450,000 worth of grants and low-interest loans, be placed atop a priority list for city services, and get free fixer-upper advice. Those blocks will also be

assigned a paid neighborhood coordinator, who will help organize block parties, brainstorm ideas for blockwide improvement projects, and, most important, help market the area to outsiders.

So far, the mayor has picked one cluster of Rising Star Blocks in the city's Northeast section. It is a six-block stretch of about 80 homes where home sale prices are well below the citywide median, about \$130,000 this year.

The city will also designate up to 12 "Pride Blocks" this year — and up to 24 next year — for similar attention. Those blocks, nominated by residents, will have access to \$10,000 each in grants and \$150,000 each in low-interest loans, and will share a paid neighborhood coordinator.

Success on those blocks will be measured, in time, by the number of loans residents take out, the number of building permits they apply for, the volume of home sale activity, an increase in property value — and of course, the strength of the social fabric that sustains it all.

TWO YEARS LATER

In Baltimore's Belair-Edison neighborhood, the nine target blocks are showing some promising signs two years into the initiative.

On Parkside Drive, where residents did some collective gardening and installed identical light posts, two houses sold on the private market this year at an average sale price of \$83,250 — way up from 2000, when two private homes sold there at an average price of \$55,000, said Joan Mitchell, marketing coordinator for Belair-Edison Neighborhoods, Inc.

On Pelham Avenue, which has a strong social network, but also a preponderance of foreclosed-on and vacant homes, six privately owned homes sold this year at an average sale price of \$66,870 — up from the \$58,000 average sale price for five private homes in 2000. The block is only one year into the "target block" initiative, and leaders hope that the volume of sales will yield some more enduring residents.

Overall, residents in Belair-Edison neighborhood have taken out close to \$500,000 in home improvement loans in the past two years. Current residents have marketed the place to their friends, bringing in a new spectrum of people, said Barbara Aylesworth, the executive director of Belair-Edison Neighborhoods Inc. The predominantly black and somewhat elderly neighborhood has now become an attractive first home-buying spot for city schoolteachers, correction officers, Johns Hopkins University graduate students, and young professionals, black and white.

And the spirit of investment is catching on. On the 3900 block of Dudley Avenue, which is not a target block, the neighbors have christened themselves the "Dudley Do-rights." They do right by the neighbors by synchronizing their porch lights, holding their block meetings outdoors on the street and agreeing to an informal personal security system: When someone comes home late at night, they may honk their horn and neighbors agree to look out their window until they make it inside.

"It brought out the best people," Aylesworth said. Of course, she added, "There will always be people who want to be grouchy and hate it and won't want to come to a community festival."

So how will this oh-so-friendly program fare in Hartford, a city where neighborhood activism centers on demanding better city services and more police protection? A city where residents took Mister Softee to court for noise violations? A city where residents have legitimate questions about police staffing?

It will do just fine, the mayor says.

"There's a lot of energy in Hartford and what we're doing is tapping into that energy," Perez said. "Right now people are not being asked to participate in a positive way, so they end up complaining and pointing a finger."

HOW TO 'SELL' A BLOCK

In Belair-Edison, Aylesworth's agency is a longtime neighborhood group that used to spend its time strong-arming the city to fix the ills of the neighborhood, which has seen shifts in racial demographics and plummeting home values in the past decade.

"We were really seeing the neighborhood as a collection of problems," Aylesworth said. That certainly wasn't helping sell the place.

The goal of starting up the target blocks was to have emblems of neighborhood pride to showcase, rather than public problems to air.

These days her group is more of a real estate watchdog, a welcome wagon, and a clearinghouse for social events in the neighborhood. The nature of their community meetings has changed too.

"Instead of ranting and raving to the police for an hour, we have people doing a slide show on how to do their garden and how to plant perennials," Aylesworth said.

Of course there are some problems.

On Pelham Avenue, for example, the block has found an innovative way to deal with a chronically noisy neighbor. They've called in a mediator to help broker a deal between the neighbor and the rest of the block, where people say they've had trouble sleeping.

But that's a private affair, not something for mention in "News on our Block," Jasuta's and Duffy's newsletter.

The letter will tell you, however, where to buy a Belair-Edison bumper sticker or how to get a tree planted in front of your home.

And you will also get a gentle reminder: Please remember to keep your porch lights on.