

West Side to get

\$12 million boost

◆ **Revitalization:** City, with help from St. Mary's Bank, hopes to convince home, business owners to improve area.

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MANCHESTER — On paper, the city's multi-million dollar plan for revitalizing a key West Side neighborhood solves a

myriad of problems, from parking frustrations and dilapidated properties to the spike in crime and lack of hometown pride.

Making it happen means convincing residents to get on board and enticing potential home and

business owners to find their way to the 60-block area surrounding Kelley Street.

Last night the deal was sweetened with the announcement of a \$12 million incentive program offering below-market fixed rate loans for home owners, first-time home buyers and businesses.

The loan program is made possible through a partnership between St. Mary's Bank and

Amoskeag Industries, and is available to all West Side residents, including those outside the designated Rimmon Heights area, said Ron Rioux, St. Mary's Bank president and CEO.

"Joining our resources with the city of Manchester and the planning commission, St. Mary's seeks to do at the beginning of this century just as we did at the beginning of the last century:

empower residents," said Rioux.

"Although revitalization efforts will be concentrated around Rimmon Heights, improvement loans will be available to all residents west of the Merrimack River," he said during last night's meeting at America's Credit Union Museum on Notre Dame Avenue.

More than half the allocated

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money will be available to homeowners for repairing and refurbishing existing property. The remaining \$5.5 million is earmarked for business owners to buy equipment, make repairs or expand their businesses, Rioux said.

Some 40 business owners and residents attended the meeting, along with about 25 public officials, bank representatives and community leaders.

Among them state Rep. Jane Beaulieu, longtime West Side resident and community advocate.

"The West Side could be another SoHo. It could be what downtown Manchester isn't, a place tourists and residents want to be," Beaulieu said. "It's very exciting, not only for the West Side, but the whole city."

Kelley Street business owner Debbie Valente, voiced concern over what effect ripping up the main drag for proposed parking and pedestrian crossing improvements would have on local businesses.

David Preece, director of Southern New Hampshire Planning Commission, assured her there would be plenty of advance notice.

"We'll work with you on that," he said.

Bike shop owner Ryan Belanger of Weare, who is acquiring a Kelley Street business, echoed Valente's concern. But he said the promise of the finished project could lure him back to the city where he was born and raised.

"I couldn't convince my wife

to buy a home on Manchester's West Side, so we ended up in the suburbs, like a lot of people. But if you get a project like this going, I would love to live in Manchester again," Belanger said. "You guys are really forward thinking."

Part of the revitalization plan includes reducing the number of rental households on the West Side — estimated at 70 percent.

Ron Dupont of Red Oak Property Management said his research shows the city has a glut of three- and four-bedroom multi-family units.

"The vacancy factor is huge, and it's a problem that leads to continued vacancy for years. It's not just here in Manchester. It's a societal phenomenon, and something that we need to keep in mind as we move forward," Dupont said.

"We potentially do not lack affordable housing in Manchester anymore. What's happened is people have moved into three- and four-bedroom newly built communities on the outskirts of the city for the same rent or less, leaving center city with a 15 percent vacancy rate," Dupont said. "And that's a problem, especially where safety is concerned."

Pam Goucher, deputy director for the city's planning department, was intrigued by Dupont's statistics.

"That doesn't jive with what I'm hearing. But if what he says is true, it's something we need to follow up on," Goucher said.