

## West Side eyes success in Center City

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**MANCHESTER** – If it could succeed in the Center City, it can work on the West Side.

But it will take the combined efforts of concerned citizens, caring landlords and support from city leaders to restore the neighborhoods' sense of pride and security.

That's how housing advocates assess the challenges facing the city's West Side, which is seeing an increase in crime this summer.

Fifteen years ago, much of Manchester's inner city — known by many back then as "The Zone" — was blighted with drugs, violence and other criminal activity.

Then residents took back their neighborhoods, in large part due to initiatives by the non-profit Manchester Neighborhood Housing Services, which bought the run-down apartment buildings, renovated them, and turned them into homes. Today, the area is known as the Center City.

It wasn't just about buying up cheap real estate, says Robert Tourigny, who is executive director of MNHS. "It wasn't to make a buck; it was to make an impact."



The recently completed building C at the new Straw Mansion Apartments. (THOMAS ROY)

"There were just so many problems in the community at that point that people were giving up," said Tourigny, who wasn't here then but knows the history from his predecessors. "It was basically getting people to say they'd had enough and to help take back the community."

"And our role was to acquire properties — one at a time if necessary — and renovate them and make them safe and decent places for people to live."

Now the same sorts of initiatives need to happen on the West Side, Tourigny said. His organization is already starting to seek out community leaders to help steer the effort.

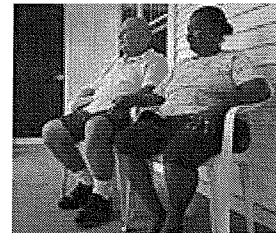
MNHS was already looking at the West Side for future projects before the recent spike in crime there, Tourigny said. "We just need to have a really comprehensive approach for getting in and targeting the right neighbors, the right property owners, and see if we can come up with an investment strategy that works."

Felix Torres was executive director of MNHS during the rebirth of the Center City. He left Manchester two years ago, and now is executive director of Neighborhood Housing Services of Baltimore.

He describes the NHS model: "You need a partnership to turn around a neighborhood. Private business, the government and the local residents all have to be united in a plan and work together to make it happen. You really can't change anything with only one; you need all three."

Torres said neighborhood reinvestment experts have found that "a neighborhood that has less than a 60 percent home ownership rate is a neighborhood that is troubled."

And he said, "The lower the home ownership rate, the higher the level of social problems."



Angel Melendez and Florida Ortiz sit in front of their apartment, formerly a motel. (THOMAS ROY)

Torres said when he first worked in Manchester, the West Side was predominantly populated by French-Canadian families who owned their homes. There was little need for the kind of intervention MNHS was doing across the river.

But by the time he left, "It was clear that was starting to change."

So Torres is not surprised to hear things have gotten worse. "Because when a neighborhood is in a downward spiral, this is what happens."

The good news, he said, is that the community already is galvanized to act.

"It's easier to stabilize a neighborhood than to rebuild a neighborhood," Torres said. "It's easier to attract people, to attract investment, and you can generally be much more successful."

Still, there are huge challenges to recreating the NHS model on the West Side today, Tourigny said. And the biggest is the current real estate market.

Back in the early '90s, he said, "You could pick up real estate cheap in the city...Today that is not the case."

"Everybody who owns something, regardless of where it is, they think...it's worth top dollar, no matter what kind of condition it's in."

There's another change; government subsidies have dried up, and groups like MNHS have to depend more on grants from philanthropic sources. Tourigny said his organization also relies on low-income housing tax credits to finance development projects.

It would take a different approach as well, Tourigny said.

Unlike the Center City, where multi-unit apartment buildings were the norm, the West Side has a lot of three-decker buildings with four units or fewer.

Tourigny envisions his organization developing creative financing packages to help local residents purchase these buildings. "Now they become owner-occupied landlords."

"And that provides a far greater benefit for the community. Because now you have somebody living there who doesn't want to just rent to anybody, because they're going to have a stake in that community. They're raising their family there as well."

And in that vision, there's a sense of the West Side coming full circle. Much of the neighborhood's housing was created as affordable housing for the Amoskeag mill workers more than 100 years ago, Tourigny noted.

He sees similarities among the new immigrants who have come to Manchester in recent years.

"They bring a work ethic to the community," he said. "We see it first hand how hard they're willing to work to provide the most they can for their families. Which is what the neighborhood needs."

"We don't need people to sit back and say hey, police, come here, fix my neighborhood for me. We need people that are willing to do something about it."

Tourigny said renovation efforts tend to create ripples that spread to other properties nearby. "We don't want to drive up the market, we don't want to cause gentrification, but to make it a happy and safe place to live, where people have a desire to live there."

Torres said he is "totally optimistic" that this sort of initiative can reverse what's been happening on the West Side.

"I've been doing community development for 20 years now, so I'm a believer in the power of a community to transform itself," he said.

The slogan of his new city, Baltimore, is "Believe," Torres noted.

"And I can tell you unequivocally, I believe in the city of Manchester. The city has done so many tremendous things in changing itself, with the stadium and the civic center and the Center City.

"There's very little, I think, the city cannot accomplish if it really just puts its mind to it."

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