



Providence

[Comments](#) 9 | [Recommend](#)  1

From blight to pride, areas 'build and believe'

01:00 AM EDT on Monday, March 22, 2010

By **Peter B. Lord**

Journal Environment Writer

It was once a high-crime spot. But in Olneyville on Sunday afternoon, children filled a new playground along the Woonasquatucket River with squeals and shrieks. A family wheeled up on the new bike path. And overlooking it all was a street of handsome new houses.

On Constitution Hill in Woonsocket, also a questionable area not long ago, children crowded another playground, a troublesome bar had been converted into a community center and families sat outdoors, enjoying Sunday's sunshine.

Down the hill at Market Square, a trendy restaurant offered valet service and views of the river. Not far away, a restaurant raised a sign for sushi.

Those achievements and much more will be celebrated Monday in Providence by a national organization with the forgettable name Local Initiatives Support Corporation.

The group has been working in Rhode Island's poor communities for more than 20 years, investing about \$10 million to \$15 million annually in housing projects, playgrounds and ball fields — always working with local organizations and community leaders.

It coordinated the reconstruction of Classical High School's Albert Morro Athletic Field, which reopened last year in Providence. A few years before, it coordinated similar improvements to Conley Field & Stadium at Mount Pleasant High School. It brought funds and organizational help to improve houses along Parkis Avenue in Elmwood in 2008.

In the last two years, it has focused on neighborhoods in Woonsocket and Olneyville, most recently surveying more than 400 residents and organizations about what they would like to do next to improve the local quality of life.

U.S. Sen. [Jack Reed](#) is expected to join Providence [Mayor David N. Cicilline](#) and Woonsocket Mayor Leo T. Fontaine as dozens of people from both communities gather Monday from 9:30 to 11 a.m. at the University of Rhode Island Feinstein Providence Campus to unveil detailed new plans to invest in both neighborhoods.

Both cities have been hurt by the recession, with average household incomes about half what they are in the rest of Rhode Island. But LISC officials say the communities have vibrant organizations and leaders who are willing

to work together to make life better.

They have organizations working on crime, housing and education, says Barbara Fields, executive director of the group's Rhode Island program. LISC's strategy is to bring people together to work on all the issues simultaneously, while LISC injects some financing and organizational work.

Similar efforts are under way with LISC in communities around the country. But Jordan says the work here has been garnering national attention for successfully coordinating improvements to make communities more livable.

"What we're really talking about is community control," says Carrie Zaslow, a LISC program officer, as she points out changes in Woonsocket. That effort has led to such diverse results as better relationships with local police, planting a small grove of apple trees on an empty lot, and setting up bicycle racks to reduce bike thefts for commuters.

In Olneyville, LISC's Nancy Howard points with pride to the new playground and houses on Aleppo Street and other renovated houses nearby.

One strategy, she said, is gaining points of entry to deteriorated neighborhoods by fixing up houses on street corners.

One huge change came when local police lieutenants started handing out their cell-phone numbers, Howard said. That act of trust started creating a bond with the community.

The new programs in Olneyville and Woonsocket will be called "Our Neighborhoods: Invest. Build. Believe."

Each community has agreed to long lists of goals, such as developing dozens of foreclosed properties, increasing parking, or improving summer-job opportunities for youth.

For every goal, Fields said, a "champion" has already stepped forward — a group or individual pledging to make the goal become reality.

For more information, go to www.rilisc.org.

BY THE NUMBERS Olneyville

One of Rhode Island's most diverse neighborhoods, with a unique mix of houses, mills and parks, it has been hit hard by the economic downturn, according to these figures supplied by the Rhode Island Local Initiatives Support Corporation

5,493

people estimated to live here in 2009, up about 7 percent from 2000

66 percent of the population Hispanic in 2009, an increase of 27 percent since 2000

\$22,773 estimated annual household income, compared with a state household median of \$53,901

14 percent estimated unemployment from July 2008 to June 2009, compared with an official unemployment rate for Providence County of 13.3 percent as of May 2009

\$115,000 the median sales prices of houses in 2008, a decline of 54 percent in three years

315 vacant addresses reported by the U.S. Postal Service in the second quarter of 2009. This is 11 percent of all

addresses, compared with a vacancy rate of 3.6 percent for all of Providence County66 and 67 percent

of all loans in 2005 and 2006 were sub-prime. In 2007, only 64 residential loans were made, compared with 196 in 2005

BY THE NUMBERSWoonsocket's Constitution Hill, Fairmount and Main Street neighborhoods

Once making up a major manufacturing center, they remain a beautiful, diverse community hit hard by the recession

\$26,917 to \$38,904

the range of median household incomes in the three neighborhoods in 2009. The statewide median household income was \$53,901

10,448

people were estimated to live here in 2009, an increase of 1 percent over 2000 Census data514

households — 12 percent of total — are considered linguistically isolated, with no English-speaking adults14.5 to 19.6

percent unemployment rates estimated for the three neighborhoods — compared with 9.8 percent for the city as a whole\$165,000

median house price in 2008, down from \$240,000 in 2006. Sales declined, from 3,534 in 2006, to 287 in 20087th

most affected ZIP code in Rhode Island for foreclosures, according to the Boston Federal Reserve Bank, with 40 foreclosed properties as of March 200945.1 to 52.5 percent

of all loans in the three neighborhoods in 2005 were sub-prime. The percentage statewide was 27.6 percent.

plord@projo.com