

North Side revival

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Churches and other faith-based groups redouble efforts to restore housing -- and hope -- in the ravaged neighborhood.



A crew from Urban Homeworks worked near 18th and Emerson. "The foreclosure crisis has hit north Minneapolis particularly hard," said Thomas Streitz, housing director for Minneapolis. Faith-based groups are "willing to take on the toughest houses and projects that other developers are not interested in."

Photo: **Elizabeth Flores**, Star Tribune

Turning former crack houses into family homes. Building apartments on vacant lots. Converting foreclosed property into affordable places to live.

These are the projects that have drawn church volunteers and faith-based groups to the North Side of Minneapolis for decades. Now they're stepping up to help residents fix homes or find new ones in the aftermath of the May tornado that ripped through the community.

"When you have people who are homeless and ... then become stable, it gives them a sense of hope and faith," said Nene Jones, who helps place families in homes renovated by New Salem Missionary Baptist Church in north Minneapolis.

Even before the tornado hit, housing was a problem in north Minneapolis, home to about half of the city's 2,308 foreclosures last year.

Twin Cities faith-based nonprofits such as Urban Homeworks were already trying to buy and renovate foreclosed properties and then rent or sell them to low-income families. Since 1995, Urban Homeworks has renovated or built 152 multifamily units or single-family homes, close to half of them on the North Side, executive director Chad Schwitters said.

"When we talk about people, we can't talk about them very long until we talk about place," Schwitters said. "Place is a reflection of people. The environment in which we live, play and worship is as much about how we understand our faith as is the other sides of theology that are more conventional, like spirituality and other things."

Urban Homeworks was on the front lines of the tornado cleanup and now hopes to help people set the agenda for what comes next.

"We're ... trying to convene a group of people that are neighbors who live, work or have a strong interest in north Minneapolis to figure out how do we rebuild," Schwitters said. "And how do we make sure the economic impact of activity benefits individuals and businesses in north Minneapolis."

Faith-based groups have played a crucial role in shoring up the fragile housing situation on the North Side, said Thomas Streitz, Minneapolis housing director. They see promise where developers do not see profit.

"The foreclosure crisis has hit north Minneapolis particularly hard," Streitz said. "They're [faith-based groups] willing to take on the toughest houses and projects that other developers are not interested in. They go beyond the economic model to say, 'What do we have to do to help families stabilize themselves?' And they ask the question: 'What's good for the overall community?' They're taking a longer-term view of what success means."

For example, it's been about 20 years since New Salem Missionary Baptist Church started "Operation Roof" -- buying tax-forfeited

residential properties and renovating them, then renting or selling them to low-income families. The church has rehabbed about 20 houses or multifamily units, some of which were former crack houses, Jones said.

'A stable place to stay'

With funding from its congregation, the church now buys foreclosed homes or multifamily units to help people on welfare, those with poor credit, first-time home buyers and others. The majority of their rental properties go for between \$800 to \$1,000 a month for a four or five-bedroom unit.

Post-tornado, it is helping residents fix roofs, replace windows and make other repairs.

"Once you give a person a stable place to stay, they can start to make things happen for themselves," Jones said.

Habitat for Humanity, which calls itself an ecumenical Christian housing organization, has also made a big imprint in north Minneapolis. Habitat has built 161 homes in north Minneapolis and restored 300 more through its "A Brush with Kindness" program, which helps families repair their homes and avoid foreclosure.

Less than a month after the tornado, Habitat has dedicated seven new North Side homes. Over the next year and a half, it will build 13 more. It also is developing a program to help low-income, under-insured homeowners rebuild.

"This tornado is just the latest crisis," said Matt Haugen, communications manager for Twin Cities Habitat. "We think putting homes together and investing in neighborhoods ... has an exponential effect of strengthening a block, and then a block strengthens a few more, and then all of a sudden you have a neighborhood people want to invest in."

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