City Heights renews faith in good citizens

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Last weekend, when a new resident was waiting for a loan approval for a house in City Heights, a dozen neighbors showed up to help her clean up the property.

"We cleaned up the canyon, which the former resident had used as a dump, pulled junk out of the basement, pulled up the old carpets, and filled a 40-foot Dumpster in a day," says Michael Sprague, vice chairman of the nonprofit City Heights Town Council, which until last month was known as the City Heights Improvement Partnership.

"This is a good person, a good citizen," Sprague explains. "We want her to qualify for the loan, and we want her to stay."

This was the third house in three months that City Heights community activists had helped clean and paint.

If Americans are renewing some old values and customs, this is a good one: the modern-day version of barn raising. We live in an era when urban neighborhoods, and not a few suburban ones, must constantly fight crime, graffiti and decay. Government, often hamstrung by budget cuts, bureaucracy and distance from the problems, is increasingly ineffectual.

So neighborhood volunteers are moving into the vacuum, ones like Sprague, or Linda Bridges Pennington, volunteer coordinator for Project CLEAN, and Sharon Wilson, director of San Diegans United for Safe Neighborhoods.

In City Heights, a network of neighborhoods stretching from Interstate 805 to 55th Street containing more than 70,000 people, the Town Council supports the existing volunteer efforts, such as City Heights on Patrol, a mobile neighborhood safety patrol. But now the council wants to train citizens to create neighborhood associations or neighborhood watches; to create safety patrols; to launch cleanup campaigns.

Pennington and a band of volunteers have raised graffiti removal and prevention to something of an art form; now she wants to train volunteers throughout City Heights how to do it. She'll soon get a chance to do that, with a little help from Price Charities, a foundation created by Sol Price, founder of the Price Club.

Price Charities views City Heights as a make-or-break neighborhood for grass-roots neighborhood revivalism. Because of efforts by Price -- and because of some support from the city -- City Heights will probably be the largest, most cohesive community renewal effort in the county. And perhaps in the country.
On March 10, the Town Council received a check for $25,000, the first major installment of a commitment of $100,000 annually, for three years. "We're not only interested in the Town Council, but various other things that we might fund in City Heights," says Ted Hurwitz, president of Price Charities. "The Price family has committed (this money) provided that the community matches it."

Unless people in the neighborhoods invest their sweat and tears, community renewal cannot be sustained -- no matter how successful individual programs are. That's what Price believes. And Wilson agrees. She says the matching money will be raised through community bake sales, garage sales, car washes "and even by going door-to-door with a cup if we have to."

She admits that bake sales are unlikely to produce $100,000 a year, so the Town Council is seeking additional foundation and government grants.

Although Price prefers that the fund raising be as close to bake sales as possible, Hurwitz says the foundation will be flexible. So far, the Town Council has collected about $50,000 in pledges, primarily from City Heights volunteer associations. The city has donated office space in an old Parks and Recreation building. "Price has been very clear with us that we can't become dependent on this money, that we'll be weaned from it, so that they can move on to help with other projects and neighborhoods," Sprague says.

The Town Council's role will be to augment government, not replace it. For example: A neighborhood association can help residents connect with the public or private agencies that can help them. "Most people don't know that the AFL-CIO sponsors a program to install security devices such as deadbolt locks, security screen doors and safety lights free of charge to low-income homeowners."

"Here's another example," says Wilson, who works as a part-time teacher's aide. "Between 100 and 150 reports of code violations, primarily graffiti, are turned into the city every month -- just from the City Heights area. But there is only one city graffiti code enforcement officer for the whole city."

This city employee must visit the site, verify the damage and determine the ownership of the property. Then the city must send a letter to the owner, notifying them of the graffiti. If you're the owner, you have 72 hours to paint it out. If you don't, the city will paint it out for you and send you a bill." This process can take weeks or months.

"Meanwhile, volunteer squads from the neighborhood could have painted that graffiti out within hours," Wilson says. "Our suggestion is that the city share the identified code violations with community groups like the Town Council. We can organize squads of volunteers; we can take care of many of these reports. Then we can let the city know that we've taken care of, say, half of the reports for that month. The city can then focus on the ones we're not capable of dealing with."
Such efforts could save taxpayers a lot of money, prevent the decline of neighborhoods and create a greater sense of community. "The goal is to create as much self-reliance as possible," Wilson says. "Nobody knows our problems, or their solutions, as well as we do."

RICHARD LOUV's column appears here on Wednesdays and in Currents on Saturdays.