

## City Heights proud of its sprucing up with 600 new trees

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*Author: Dee Anne Traitel*

Vera Hickson found it difficult to contain her excitement when the street in her City Heights neighborhood suddenly sprouted trees this week.

"We got trees," Hickson called across the porch to next-door neighbor Donald Billyou on Wednesday.

Meanwhile, workers wielding shovels were tilling the soil to plant another crop of carrotwood and liquidambar trees farther down Marlborough Avenue.

By the end of February, more than 600 trees will have been planted in what's been billed as the "re-greening" of City Heights .

The City Heights project is similar to a national tree-planting campaign unveiled Wednesday by President Bush, who wants government and business to help plant billions of trees to beautify communities and aid the environment.

Settled in the early 1920s as University Avenue stretched eastward, City Heights is one of San Diego's oldest communities. In recent years, the working-class neighborhood has become a multiethnic community, blighted in many areas by crime and graffiti.

"People are learning to live with each other here," said Jim Bliesner, a founding board member of the City Heights Development Corp. "A lot of people when they land in San Diego live here; then they move up and out."

Because of the community's transitory nature, many of the neighborhoods in the area -- which is bordered by Interstate 805 to the west, Euclid Avenue to the East and El Cajon Boulevard to the north -- have become neglected and rundown.

City and county officials hope to instill pride in the inner-city neighborhood and replace some of the 1,000 trees destroyed by disease since the 1950s.

Tomorrow, the City Heights Development Corp., which coordinated the \$21,000 tree-planting effort, plans to throw a party with city and county officials and residents to celebrate the success of the "Adopt-A-Tree" project.

"Doing a tree is a very symbolic, simple commitment to improving the neighborhood," Bliesner said.

"Trees have a sort of magical quality about them -- they're a statement of hope in the future because you don't put a tree in the ground and expect it to die. You expect it to

be around for a while."

Over the past several years, volunteers have laid the groundwork for the mass planting, going door to door asking residents if they would donate \$8 to buy a tree and eliciting a promise that they would care for the tree once it was planted. More than 400 residents adopted trees.

Neighbors worked with volunteers from environmental groups, like the Sierra Club, to prepare the ground and to buy, haul and plant many types of trees in front and back yards.

"What we'd like to see is an urban forest in City Heights in the next 10 years," said Marc Schumacher, the project coordinator. "The cityscape of City Heights is going to be completely different."

Five years ago, the City Heights Development Corp. began looking for ways to spruce up the community's landscape and morale and to boost the economy and build affordable housing.

The group came up with the tree-planting idea and garnered the help of a host of volunteers and county Supervisor Leon Williams and John Hartley, now a city councilman.

Funding for the project came from San Diego block grants, the county, The Parker Foundation, the San Diego Community Foundation and hundreds of City Heights residents.

Caption: 1 PIC

Mark Schumacher, coordinator of the City Heights tree-planting project, left, and community activist Jim Bliesner plant a carrotwood tree on Landis Street as part of the "re-greening" effort for the neighborhoods Tribune photo

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