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NEW SPIRIT: The first of four derelict buildings in the Goose Hill neighborhood was reduced to a heap of rubble Tuesday.

Demolition points way to beautification

By Rod Hafemeister

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EAST ST. LOUIS — Ruby Whitfield watched as the front-end loader crashed into the charred wood and pushed it together into piles.

On Tuesday morning, Whitfield's derelict property was converted to clear land, with a possible future as a neighborhood flower garden in a program of Operation New Spirit and the Monsanto Fund.

"I'm so delighted I feel like shouting!" she said — and did. "They say good things come to those who wait. And I've been waiting a long time."

For almost 50 years, Whitfield has lived in the Goose Hill neighborhood of East St. Louis, the 22 blocks along the city's border with National City.

She's seen it go from a neighborhood of nice, modest homes to one of vacant lots and derelict structures — including the former rental home Whitfield owned at 818 N. Second St.

The house burned down about 18 months ago, leaving behind crumbled and charred remains. The lot quickly became choked with weeds and brush and the trash such lots attract.

"I tried to keep it up the best I could, but it just got away from me," Whitfield said. "I needed help."

Help arrived from Operation New Spirit, a neighborhood improvement project under the Metro East Church-Based Citizens Organization. Using a \$10,000 grant from the Monsanto Fund, New Spirit is demolishing four derelict structures

in the Goose Hill neighborhood.

This is the second \$10,000 grant Monsanto has given New Spirit for cleaning up derelict buildings. In June, five buildings in the city's Rush City neighborhood were demolished.

"I think this is a good example of social responsibility by Monsanto," said Alandra Byrd, with New Spirit. "They were more than willing to help. We're hoping to get donations from other corporations."

East St. Louis has identified about 1,600 derelict properties in the city and is beginning a citywide demolition program that is expected to take several years.

"We're just doing a few homes at a time," Byrd said. "But it's a start."

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