

NEWS

Monsanto

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MONSANTO DONATION HELPS BEAUTIFY EAST ST. LOUIS

EAST ST. LOUIS, June 6, 1995 -- East St. Louis residents are taking the initiative to solve some of the problems that have emerged in many area neighborhoods over the years. Working with a \$10,000 grant from Monsanto Company, Operation New Spirit, a citizen-run organization, will begin demolition of four abandoned buildings as it takes the lead in a city-wide effort to improve the community.

Beginning at 9 a.m. on Wednesday June 7, contractors will raze the building at 1028 Mississippi St. -- the first of four abandoned homes along the western communities in East St. Louis that will be demolished as a part of the project. The demolition of the homes represents Operation New Spirit's latest efforts to beautify the city and make it safer for neighborhood residents.

"We began by working a lot in vacant lots and trash-filled alleys, and then many of the residents in the area came to us and voiced their concern about the problems caused by vacant, derelict houses," said Alandra L. Byrd, neighborhood organizer for Operation New Spirit.

"We want to remove the environmental blight caused by these abandoned buildings which present a whole gamut of problems in the neighborhood."

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The problems associated with the vacant buildings have increased over the years as the buildings have deteriorated. One of the primary concerns of residents is that the crumbling structures create a safety hazard for area children who often play in them.

Some residents whose homes are next to the abandoned buildings have a hard time getting house insurance, and the deserted buildings have lowered the property value of many of the homes in the area. Also, some residents have pointed to the abandoned buildings as potential sources of crime and drug use.

In 1993, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency started the Mississippi River Gateway Initiative, which focuses the resources of federal, state, and local agencies on human health risks associated with problem areas such as these abandoned buildings. In the initiative, The U.S. EPA identified derelict and vacant housing as one of the primary threats to the health of area residents.

"The U.S. EPA historically has not dealt with abandoned homes, however, after hearing of these local problems, we found they fit in with the overall approach the Gateway Initiative takes toward community-based environmental issues," said U.S. EPA Public Affairs Coordinator John Perrecone. "Monsanto's involvement with Operation New Spirit is an excellent example of how government, industry and the community can work together in addressing local public health problems."

After spotting the original problem, Operation New Spirit administrators approached Monsanto, which has a manufacturing plant located adjacent to the affected neighborhoods, about funding a clean-up project. Monsanto's initial outlay of \$10,000 has taken a step to make many residents' dreams of a better neighborhood a reality.

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"We are part of this community and are committed to doing our share to help our neighbors meet their goals," said Russ Sackett, plant manager at Monsanto's W.G. Krummrich facility. "We want to take an active role in supporting organizations like Operation New Spirit which have had a great deal of success revitalizing the community from within."

According to Byrd, the efforts of Monsanto and Operation New Spirit have fused into a successful partnership that responds to the needs of the community.

"Residents began to make their concerns known, and Monsanto was the first company to listen. Monsanto was eager to help, and they came to us and asked 'what can we do?'," Byrd said. "We hope that Monsanto's involvement will be a model for other companies and encourage them to become involved."

The private efforts of Operation New Spirit represent a trend toward increased civic-mindedness of the citizens and city officials alike. Following the initiative of Operation New Spirit, the city of East St. Louis hopes to begin a similar demolition program this summer that will target 20 additional vacant buildings in neighborhoods throughout the city, said East St. Louis city Press Secretary Calvin Jones.

"Certainly we see the work of Operation New Spirit as a positive step in the direction of alleviating some of the problems faced in these neighborhoods. Any demolition of vacant, derelict homes helps remove problems such as the inherent threat these homes pose to youth," Jones said. "Programs like Operation New Spirit's demolition can change the face of a whole neighborhood -- eliminating problems while making more positive aspects possible, like the development of new homes."

Three other houses, located at 1018 Paradise St., 1052 Paradise St. and 903 Sycamore St., will complete the Operation New Spirit project within 30 days of the June 7 demolition.

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