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Jones Square neighborhood poised for a renaissance

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A driver slowly circled Jones Square Park, and then drove away.

On this morning — the morning neighborhood leaders would formally announce a \$400,000 state grant to begin rehabbing homes on the square — there were no prostitutes in the park. Since the police surveillance camera was posted at the east end of the park, there have been many fewer. And that's just one reason to celebrate.

At a press conference Thursday in front of 64 Lorimer St., the first home slated for renovation, state Sen. Joe Robach, R-Greece, who secured the grant, said he hopes this "will be the first of many steps."

The neighborhood, located north of Lyell Avenue and west of Lake Avenue, has seen its share of trouble and decline. The residents have been working for seven years with Interfaith Action, which helped pull several groups together to organize the neighborhood for a transformation. "This shows that we can get something accomplished," says Bill Roose, who has lived near Jones Square most of his life. "It's a great day."

Neighborhood churches, businesses and the Jones Square residents launched a campaign for redevelopment assistance three years ago, as the Rochester Rhinos soccer team sought millions in additional state aid for PAETEC Park, the stadium just to the south of Jones Square. They weren't opposed to it, but fairly questioned how so much money could be spent for a stadium when, right next door, people were battling crime and struggling to keep business strong and to prevent property values from falling further.

They called for a \$90 million Neighborhood Trust Fund to help renovate housing and businesses. It was a big request and it never materialized, but the point was right then and is right now: Building a stadium or a downtown theater or an office building will not have a trickle-down effect on neighborhoods. The only way to fix a neighborhood is to fix the neighborhood.

The \$400,000 should rehab four houses, says Frank Cornier, CEO of NCS Community Development Corp., which is overseeing the work. "In other cities, houses across from a park like this would be selling for \$200,000," he says. "We think it's only a matter of time before values go up here, too."

Providence Housing, which is affiliated with the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester, is partnering with NCS on the renovation work. The initial investment can open the door for more, says Monica McCullough, executive director of Providence. That's what has happened in the Fulton Avenue area, she says, where 10 new buildings with 20 new units have jump-started redevelopment efforts.

"This is an extraordinary group of neighbors," says Brian Kane, coordinator of Interfaith Action. They pushed for and persuaded the city to demolish dilapidated houses. They pushed for the surveillance camera, which has checked prostitution.

"And there are neighbors here who challenged the prostitutes to not stay in this neighborhood," Kane says, "and challenged landlords to rent to good people."

There is no easy way to turn around troubled neighborhoods. But what's happening in Jones Square is the way it happens. It starts with neighbors who will not be pushed out; it includes churches and community groups that are committed to change. But it also requires real money, not just hard work.
