

Survey gives S. Memphis neighbors a voice in future revitalization efforts

By Linda A. Moore

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Before the small army of volunteers was turned loose onto the streets of South Memphis Saturday, they received marching orders from their general.

"Remember your grandmother's advice. Take your hat off, leave your wet umbrellas outside and be patient," said Dr. Kenneth Reardon, professor and director of the graduate program of city and regional planning at U of M.

With those words, they left armed with clipboards and an agenda: to survey as many residents as possible to learn the strengths and weaknesses of their community and what they felt was needed to make the area better.

The project is spearheaded by St. Andrew AME Church in collaboration with The Works Community Development Corp., Self Tucker Architects, the Memphis Regional Design Center and the University of Memphis.

The survey results will be reviewed during a neighborhood meeting, and from there the collaborative will develop a comprehensive revitalization strategy, Reardon said.

"It's a resident-driven process, and the ultimate test will be when the plan rings true to residents and more important than that, when we can move from planning to implementation," Reardon said.

The focus area is bounded by Interstate 240 on the east, Person to the south, Lauderdale on the west and Trigg to the north.

By early afternoon, the surveyors had been welcomed by 112 residents.

The U of M students who conducted surveys over the weekend are studying anthropology, architecture, engineering and city and regional planning.

Dane Forlines, a graduate student in city and regional planning, said, "As an aspiring planner I've committed to public service, and we've committed to the neighborhood. Anyway I can contribute to improving the quality of life in this neighborhood, I want to be part of that."

Partnered with Ashley Camper, who will soon enter the same graduate program, he knocked on doors, quizzing residents such as Metrio Robinson, who were willing to take the time to answer questions.

"It's good that they're trying to do something," said Robinson, 23, a psychiatric manager at a mental health facility and Christian musician with the stage name Truck. "It means a lot that they to go out in the rain to take a survey."

He's lived in the area all his life and has now taken over the family home where his great-grandparents once lived.

As a payer of city and county taxes, Easter Jackson, 79 and retired, said her neighborhood doesn't get the kind of services it deserves.

Despite the overgrown lots, vacant houses and public perceptions, she defends where she lives.

"It's a nice neighborhood," Jackson said.

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