

Project working to change perceptions

Organizers: Entire community helps build strong core

By JaNAE FRANCIS

Standard-Examiner staff jfrancis@standard.net

OGDEN — When 10-year-old Angel was asked to draw a picture of likable things about the neighborhood, the youth instead wrote on two sides of the paper, separating likes and dislikes.

“I like to play with my friends in the neighborhood because there are some nice people,” Angel wrote. “I like my neighborhood because there are some nice people.”

On the other side, Angel wrote: “One thing I don’t like about my neighborhood is that there are people that hurt or harm you.”

Angel’s insights were collected as part of an information-gathering process being orchestrated by Ogden United Promise Neighborhood. The group is studying a 5-mile area, from 9th Street to 44th Street and from Harrison Boulevard to 1900 West, with plans to solve problems there.

The effort is the result of a \$500,000 grant won from the federal government in December to listen to residents’ needs.

Organizers are collecting the data but are also asking the community to come together for solutions, including finding grants and funding on state and local levels to address the needs.

Ogden United Promise Neighborhood will then compete with efforts from nine other cities for a chance at up to \$35 million in federal funds, enough to transform the city into what currently seems like only a big dream.

Promise Neighborhood is a federal program designed to give hope to cities already on the edge of transformation — cities that have the resources in place to change lives and find a way to provide top-level education for youths. The program recognizes that meeting basic needs is a key to raising the education bar.

“You need to get to school ready to start school and have that be a priority,” Mayor Mike Caldwell said in explaining the multifaceted approach to education. “That is what Promise Neighborhood is definitely about.”

And Scott Ericson, community development specialist with Ogden city and Promise Neighborhood, said some of the unsafe feelings of people in the Promise Neighborhood will be addressed with education.

“One of the challenges Ogden has is, people view the city negatively,” he said. “Most of that is perception. It’s not accurate.”

Ericson said schools are above average and crime rates in most cases are below average.

The promises

Five of the program’s promises center on community:

- Students feel safe at school and in their community.

“Students feel safe at school and traveling to and from school,” Tim Jackson, project director of Promise Neighborhood, wrote in an email to the Standard-Examiner.

- Students live in stable communities.

“Students do not have to switch schools regularly (student mobility) due to unstable housing and other factors, which prevent youth and families from being able to settle down and integrate into the neighborhood,” he wrote.

- Families and community members support learning within schools.

“Parents and caregivers read, sing songs, tell stories, and discuss books with children in the early years of their life, which leads to better literacy and cognitive development outcomes later for children,” Jackson wrote.

“Parents encourage their children who can read to do so outside of school. Parents and caregivers talk to their high school students about the importance of college and career.”

- Students have access to 21st-century learning tools.

“Students have school and home access to broadband Internet and a connected computing device,” Jackson wrote.

* Students are healthy and access learning and enrichment activities.

“Children participate in at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity daily and consume five or more servings of fruits and vegetables daily,” Jackson wrote.

Ogden Police Lt. Scott Conley, who is assigned to the city’s gang prevention unit, said keeping children like Angel safe will require buy-in from the entire community.

“You can’t arrest yourself out of a problem,” he said. “We have to partner with those who have the resources in dealing with it. It’s kind of like putting the stakeholders around a centerpiece — those who have the strength to eliminate it or enrich it.”

He said the community needs to get behind police in not only reporting crime and watching out for one another, but also in finding the root causes of problems and addressing them.

“To strengthen the entity within, you have to either enrich it, eliminate it or apply the proper resources,” Conley said.

He said when everyone works together, kids can feel safe as they travel to and from school.

“We’ve determined that, in education, crime has a factor,” he said.

Parental factor

And another factor being addressed is the ability of parents to help children with school.

Former Mayor Matthew Godfrey, who now is CEO of Better City and just one of a host of volunteers in the effort, is heading up an initiative for a parent university.

So far, the effort has hosted a few classes, but it will be unveiled this fall.

“The idea is helping parents help their children,” Godfrey said. “There is a large number of parents who want their kids to do better than they currently are, but they don’t know how to go about it.”

And Godfrey said it’s easy to understand the dilemma those parents have.

“If your kid is struggling in trigonometry, and you have never had trigonometry, what do you do?”

Also covered in parent university will be finding financial means to send kids to college.

Godfrey said the free classes for parents will even be developed so the parents may earn a certificate of graduation for their efforts.

Mobility issue

Another way the promises listed above are being addressed is with strategic developments throughout the Promise Neighborhood.

Ogden city is collaborating with Ogden School District in the development of schools.

Odyssey Elementary School was built in an existing park facility, and the new Dee Elementary School is scheduled to be built in Liberty Park.

This way of building schools, Ericson said, limits the cost of property for the school district, and it brings the school into the neighborhood.

But private developments also are key to changing the face of the Promise Neighborhood.

In the heart of Ogden, Ericson said, housing is 52 percent rental units, 12 percent vacancies and 35 percent owner-occupied homes.

“With less than 50 percent of people owning their homes, mobility rates are pretty high,” said Leslie Herold, executive director of collective impact at United Way of Northern Utah.

“Nationally, you can tie mobility rates to student achievement,” said Kate Bideaux, a grant specialist with Ogden city schools.

City officials are working to change those percentages to create permanency among residents, Ericson said.

“Geographically, we want Ogden to be a place where people love, a place where they want to stay,” Herold said.

“The city has done research,” Ericson said. “If you turn around enough of the neighborhood, other people want to take pride in their property.”

In a tour of the neighborhood, Ericson showed properties the city has developed strategically in areas where older homes were run down. He pointed to homes in between new homes, where owners have fixed them up.

“It’s called the brokenwindow syndrome,” Conley said, noting that as the broken windows are fixed in some areas, other properties and attitudes begin to look better.

Ogden United Promise Neighborhood also has made an effort to collaborate with as many of the faith-based organizations as they can within the 5-mile area in an effort to create a grassroots effort for far-reaching change.

Success rubs off

Caldwell said improving the community will not only keep kids in school, but it will also keep an educated workforce from leaving after graduating from Weber State University.

“There is a sense of optimism,” Caldwell said.

“We were rated in Forbes Magazine as one of the top 20 fastest-growing cities in the United States of America a few months ago,” he said.

“We are seeing opportunities here that we haven’t seen in a long time,” he said, noting that community changes and a specialized training program provided by WSU and Ogden-Weber Tech College combined recently to attract an 850-job call center for Home Depot to open by the end of the year.

And Caldwell said addressing community needs will not only improve education and opportunities, but it will also change everything for Ogden’s future.

“People see opportunities. They see there are jobs. ... They say, ‘This is how I can provide for my family,’ ” he said.

“You can really track this. I saw a study in the Wall Street Journal of the 10 most-dangerous cities. You could track crime rate. It was almost an exact parallel of people living in poverty.”

He said that, in Detroit, there seems to be no sense of hope for the poor there.

“They don’t see it. They can’t feel it. They can’t participate in the economy.”

But, he said, in contrast, if there is a sense of hope, if people see others all around them being successful, they are a lot more likely to be involved in the workforce.

“This was a real unique grant for us to get,” Caldwell said. “We have everybody working on this.”

He listed a number of agencies and groups involved, including most prominently United Way of Northern Utah, Ogden city, Ogden School District and a host of others, including faith-based organizations.

“If we can do this right, it will be a national model for turnaround that everyone will be interested in.”