

community

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NL | FRIDAY, JULY 29, 2011 | SECTION C

Agency: Wide support for public safety initiative

FOR THE TIMES

HAMMOND | Due to the success of its pilot project, "Please, Have a Seat!" in East Chicago, Legacy Foundation, through grants from the Lake County Community Fund and John S. and James L. Knight Fund, has awarded Neighborhoods Inc. a total of \$21,500 to introduce the project in Miller, Hammond, Highland and to expand it in East Chicago, the agency has announced.

Neighborhoods Inc. has also received a commitment of \$20,675 from Foundations of East Chicago and a grant of \$10,000 from NIPSCO for the second phase there. A private citizen in Texas has pledged \$5,000 for the Hammond project. The Gary diocese awarded \$4,000 for the Miller project as part of the local Catholic Campaign for Human Development.

Last summer the agency built 22 of these "microparks" in East Chicago — consisting of an attractive, stamped concrete pad, ornamental bench and planter — to provide a gathering place in selected homeowners' front yards adjacent to the sidewalk. This has provided neighbors and passers-by a place to meet and socialize in a nonintrusive setting while forming friendships and strengthening community bonds.

Neighborhoods Inc. has carefully monitored the neighborhood impact of the bench. Each month from August to December last year, bench recipients were surveyed to report on how having the bench in their front yards has impacted the neighborhood. Out of 45 completed surveys and 270 questions, the results have been overwhelmingly positive. Participants report that neighbors, walkers, schoolchildren, dog-walkers and other passers-by enjoy resting and socializing on the benches on a regular basis.

One recipient whose bench is located across the street from an elementary school on Magoun Avenue mentioned that parents sit there to wait for their children when school lets out. She was delighted that on the first day of school parents were taking photos of their children sitting on the bench. Another participant on Homerlee Avenue enjoys the community bonds that are being strengthened by sitting down with her neighbors and sharing coffee together.

Others appreciate how the bench works as an "ice-breaker" to meet previously unknown neighbors by inviting them to sit on the bench.

There have been no reports of any abuse to the benches or complaints about its appearance. Rather, Neighborhoods Inc. has received numerous requests from others about how they could have a bench installed in front of their homes.

After an interested homeowner completes an application, Neighborhoods Inc. will inspect their property and select bench locations based on visibility, foot traffic, interest level, municipal codes and homeowner's acceptance of contract for placement.

"We expect this project to serve several purposes: enhance public safety and stimulate neighborliness, neighborhood beautification and to stabilize or increase property values," said Keith D. Speaks, Neighborhoods Inc. executive director.

Neighborhoods Inc. seeks additional financial support in order to reach its goal of 100 microparks this year. Contact Speaks at (219) 844-1876 or kdshhsac@hotmail.com. Donations are tax-deductible.