

IN NEIGHBORS COMMUNITIES

A neighborly place to sit

Project aims at fostering togetherness, community

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A collaboration between two neighboring not-for-profits is encouraging residents to spruce up their blocks and get to know one another by sitting down and talking a while.

The Please, Have a Seat! program by Hammond's Neighborhoods Inc. and the Foundations of East Chicago was unveiled recently to applause. The program seeks to install at least 100 ornamental benches for the sole purpose of encouraging neighbors to get to know one another in a pleasant surrounding and to give passers-by a public place to sit if they need it.

When people know their neighbors, the project's organizers say, friendships are formed and community bonds are strengthened.

The idea, while not exactly new, never has been done on a large scale in the United States as far as Neighborhoods Inc. executive director Keith Speaks knows. In fact, the micro-park idea occurred to him sort of by accident: He heard about an Oak Park, Ill., family who, instead of using their backyard for socializing, put a bit of a patio in front of their house.

"It started with a couple chairs out front," said that homeowner, Steve Bankes. "We accidentally discovered that people wanted a place to enjoy their children and each other. Pretty soon, it just kind of grew.

"Now we have more neighbors, and we rely on each other for support."

Speaks approached the Foundations of East Chicago for financial assistance, which it gladly gave. Executive director Russ Taylor praised Neighborhoods Inc. for its efforts in making East Chicago a better place.

In the program's first phase, 13 benches were installed in the Roxana, Northside and Southside neighborhoods, Speaks said. The

**ABOVE:**

Blessing the bench: The Rev. Stephen Gibson (left) of St. Mary Catholic Church in East Chicago talks to guests before blessing the new bench at the home of Jose and Ascension Tristan. At right is Neighborhoods Inc. executive director Keith Speaks. The bench is part of the Please, Have A Seat! project.

LEFT:

Jose and Ascension Tristan of East Chicago sit and relax on their newly installed bench. — PHOTOS BY CHARLES MITCHELL FOR THE POST-TRIBUNE

GET INVOLVED

To qualify for the Please, Have a Seat! program, residents must pass the following requirements:

- Contribute between \$150 and \$300
- Agree to keep the bench at least three years
- Maintain its upkeep
- Plant flowers or otherwise seasonally decorate in the planting area
- Keep the bench accessible for sitting
- Maintain a valid homeowner's insurance policy on the property and assume all liability for it
- Receive written permission from Neighborhoods Inc. to alter its appearance
- Never discriminate against any passer-by from using the bench unless illegal activity, such as playing loud music, vandalizing or soliciting money, is occurring.

Those interested should contact Neighborhoods Inc. at 844-1876 for more details.

micro-parks consist of a 6- by 5-foot iron bench and a decorative stone stamped concrete pad, a wrought-

Ascension and Jose Tristan were among the first to volunteer to have one in their front yard on Homerlee Avenue.

So far, they said, the results have been fantastic.

"The neighbors were looking at the bench (as it was getting installed), and finally one woman stopped and talked for a half-hour," Ascension said. "Then there were 11 more over the last four, five weeks."

In order to quantify the results, Neighborhoods Inc. will keep tabs on all the micro-parks, giving the homeowners 10 days before calling them to find out how many people dropped by and made use of the benches, Speaks said.

"We've got a lot of urban planning people watching us like hawks right now," Speaks said. "We are at the forefront of something big here."