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EAST NEIGHBORHOOD GETS VISIT FROM LEGISLATORS

SOURCE: Sara Langenberg, Herald Staff Writer

They saw stray dogs and boarded up apartment windows, mailboxes sprayed with gang names, debris-littered medians and streets without sidewalks.

They met children learning to read. They smelled the heavy odor of burning citrus peels, a byproduct of Bradenton's largest employer, and stood on what someday may be the entrance to Grace Missionary Baptist Church.

And later, they watched volunteers piece together youth programs in spite of the drug and crime problems around them.

These are the images of east Bradenton that two state legislators will carry back to Tallahassee. Packed in the back of a crowded church van, State Sen. Jim Hargrett and State Rep. Rudy Bradley spent about an hour Wednesday driving around the neighborhood just east of Tropicana Products Inc., 1001 13th Ave. E.

Their host, **Cynthia Newell** of Neighborhood Leadership Initiative Inc., said she hopes the tour will translate into more help rejuvenating the neighborhood where she grew up.

She has asked the legislators to find \$200,000 in the state budget for a youth mentoring program in the neighborhood, but also used the tour to show the lawmakers first-hand the problems their constituents live with every day.

Discussions ranged from underfunded park programs to flooding to frustrations with an aging cable system that makes it hard to hook up to the Internet.

"Today was a day of learning about the needs here," Bradley said. "Not that I haven't seen it before, but not through the organized effort that is apparent to me now. It's apparent we need to look at the issues related to flooding, the lighting and clearing up some of the lots. We need to identify potential partners in the private sector and in the various branches of government. Then we need to pull together the partners and see what each person needs to do."

Hargrett also was glad he visited.

"It does us good to come out and get a handle on what problems are going on and where we can help," he added. "We look to the community for direction, but in a neighborhood like this, where there's a chance for confusion over whether the city or county is responsible, it's important the people don't fall between the cracks. I'm glad this community finally decided to motivate its leaders to address the problems."

