

Grass-roots group wants to do more

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The loud buzz of the Tropicana processors muffle the sound of a distant police siren on an unseasonably cool September evening. Two young girls ride their bicycles down 14th Street East. The sweet smell of food being cooked by an elderly man for a church barbecue fills the air.

**Cynthia Newell** walks slowly up and down 14th Street East collecting donations for the wife of a neighbor who died at 42 of a heart attack. **Newell**, who grew up in a small, one-story home behind the Tropicana Products Inc. plant, knocks on door after door. It is a small, tight-knit community. A little more than a year ago, going from home to home would have been unheard of here.

Much has changed - more than many neighbors believed was possible.

And still more good things might be in the offing.

**Newell** and dozens of her neighbors are working on having the community - from Ninth Street East to 15th Street East, and from Eighth Avenue East to U.S. 301 - designated as a Front Porch Florida neighborhood.

The Florida Legislature has set aside \$5.2 million for revitalization for three chosen communities in the state. The grant application is due Wednesday.

Neighbors in the east Bradenton community began meeting a year ago to improve the area and to find a cohesive way to live next to the Tropicana plant, which many there call loud and smelly.

It started with a meeting in **Newell's** home in March 1998 and has snowballed into a grass-roots group called the Neighborhood Leadership Initiative Inc. The group holds quarterly meetings, which are attended by Tropicana officials and other local business leaders. The group is composed of about 140 people and run by a 10-member board.

In the past year, the group has persuaded GTE to replace old, faulty telecommunication lines, city workers to remove overgrown bushes between homes, and neighbors to clean up their yards and take pride in their neighborhood.

The group also sponsored a neighborhood Christmas decoration contest.

"We have really come together as a neighborhood," said Annie Leverette, who has lived on 14th Street East for about 22 years and came in second in the contest. "Things have either been solved or are being solved. Neighbors have really begun to work together to fix things that were neglected. It's an ongoing thing."

Their work with Tropicana has spawned a relationship.

"We think of the people in the community as our neighbors," Tropicana spokeswoman Kristine Nickel said. "We feel good about our association with our neighbors and hope to continue to work with them in the future."

The neighbors still are working toward improving the drainage in the area and cleaning up the neighborhood park on

14th Street East, which has become a hangout for drug dealers and drunken revelers.

Empty beer bottles are strewn only feet from where small children play on swings. Alcohol is prohibited in the park.

Neighbors would like to see more police patrols of the park and to see the county clean it up. Its ball field sits overrun with weeds, unusable.

The Front Porch grant would go a long way toward revitalizing the park.

To obtain Front Porch status, a proposal must be submitted by a nonprofit, community-based group.

Applicants must develop a plan that defines the problems in their neighborhood and creates solutions that come from the "bottom up, not the top down," according to Patrick Hadley, director of the state Office of Urban Opportunity. Applicants also must attach commitment letters from business owners, residents and community leaders.

**Newell**, who attended under-graduate school at Morris Brown College in Georgia and graduate school at Harvard, and others initially were hesitant to apply for the grant. Their application came only at the urging of William Gibson, president of the local NAACP chapter.

"We didn't want to go through all the bureaucracy," **Newell** said. "We didn't organize to get a grant, we organized to get results. But now that we have results, we can work toward getting more funding," she said.

The group wants to use the money to start a mobile library and open a community/technology center, which would have computers.

"Every child should be computer-literate," **Newell** said. "Those of us who are computer-literate could teach those who are not. To whom much is given, much is required."

Dozens of grass-roots groups are seeking Front Porch funds to help revitalize other Florida neighborhoods, including a group in the Rogers Garden Park Apartments area in east Bradenton and residents in a central Palmetto neighborhood.

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Caption: **Cynthia Newell**, above, is working to clean up the area around 14th Street East in Bradenton. The neighborhood association has made many improvements in the area, such as cleaning up empty alcohol bottles from the park, top, but residents want to do more.

STAFF PHOTO/THOMAS BENDER

Stagnant, mosquito-infested water sits between homes on 14th and 15th Streets East in Bradenton.

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