

Whiteaker area working for self-reliance

By JOE CONE
Of the Emerald

It may be hard to think of Eugene as having an inner city neighborhood, but then there sits Whiteaker, the old city center from where Eugene has grown.

Wedged between the Willamette River and hectic Seventh Avenue, carved into chunks by railroad tracks, the Interstate overpass and the Ferry Street Bridge, Whiteaker has been at times a neighborhood with a scattered identity, a neighborhood in decline.

But starting in 1974, when the Whiteaker Community Council was chartered, the neighborhood has been examining its problems and, with the help of local, state and — primarily — federal funds, has tried to work out innovative solutions.

Whiteaker's problems are not unfamiliar to other inner city neighborhoods. As the original site of the city, Whiteaker is an area of mixed uses — light industry, warehouses, office buildings, storefronts and houses are often found just around the corner from one another. This mixed character and the neighborhood's age have made other places in Eugene more attractive places to live, leaving Whiteaker on the "wrong side of the tracks."

In a 1976 survey conducted by the neighborhood, nearly 25 percent of Whiteaker households were found to be functioning in poverty, and fully two-thirds qualified as low-income under federal Housing and Urban Development guidelines. The economic conditions of the neighborhood made it eligible for federal aid, and since 1977 Whiteaker has been receiving funds through the Community Development Block Grant program.

The approximately \$1 million the neighborhood has been allocated so far in block grants has gone to areas of major neighborhood con-

cern. Social service projects like outreach workers, child care programs and the Community Health and Education Center have been funded through the federal programs, while physical improvements such as bike paths and new street trees have also been of priority status.

Improving the housing of residents is a third key neighborhood concern. More than 300 neighborhood residences have been designated substandard by the county assessor's office, prompting the city to establish a low-interest loan fund to bring these structures back to code level. Since the program began in 1975, 50 Whiteaker residences have been improved with funds totaling more than \$400,000.

But the rehab loan program only addresses part of the neighborhood's housing problems, explains Jim McCoy, neighborhood economic development coordinator. About 75 percent of Whiteaker residents are renters, and many of them are in the low-income bracket, McCoy points out.

Though landlords are eligible for the housing rehab loans, they have not taken advantage of the program in Whiteaker and most Whiteaker residences remain substandard.

But even beyond the issue of quality of housing, the neighborhood has been concerned with maintaining the availability of housing. Zoning in the central city tends to leave old but still fixable houses in a vulnerable position, McCoy explains, noting that with a city-wide housing vacancy rate less than one percent, demolition and redevelopment were trends the neighborhood wanted to halt.

Enter the Community Development Block Grant funds. In this year's funding the neighborhood took one innovative approach to trying to retain as much as possible of its housing supply: \$55,000 was allocated to a house-moving and land-banking plan.

The neighborhood's strategy for next year,

which was approved by the City Council recently, is even more ambitious. After months of research and discussion by Whiteaker residents, a cooperative housing corporation was formed last summer; \$28,000 has been allocated from CD funds to staff the co-op and \$87,000 earmarked to start a revolving loan fund to acquire sites and buildings for the program.

"What the housing co-op plans to accomplish," says McCoy, is to give poor people a form of home ownership. "We're very excited by the program's possibilities."

As the housing co-op plan is calculated to give residents a greater stake in the neighborhood, so another new plan seeks to give the neighborhood a greater say about its economic future.

"We know that Whiteaker's going to be under all kinds of development pressures both in housing and in the commercial sector," McCoy observes. "You can see it on Fifth Street now, and it's going to come right on down the length of the neighborhood."

With these pressures in mind, the neighborhood allocated \$84,000 from its '79-80 CD budget to staff, organize and operate a "community development-type" corporation which would identify and act on community economic priorities.

"We're trying to set up an institution that will give us some kind of influence on the types of economic decisions that are being made around here," says McCoy.

The neighborhood should know whether it will be the recipient of a \$150,000 planning grant to further develop its ideas for an integrated self-reliant neighborhood by May. But, says McCoy, Whiteaker is likely to become more involved with appropriate technology projects regardless.

"We'd still be in the soup," he says, "it just depends how much chicken is in the stock."

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