



U.S. official praises development in Olneyville, South Providence

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Ronald C. Sims, deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, center, tours Providence's Olneyville neighborhood with Nancy Smith Greer, left, of the Providence HUD field office, R.I. Housing's Richard Godfrey, rear left, and Scott Wolf, of Grow Smart Rhode Island.

The Providence Journal / Andrew Dickerman

PROVIDENCE — A federal housing official said Friday that the “sustainable and livable” community development taking shape in the distressed communities of Olneyville and South Providence are the type of projects the Department of Housing and Urban Development is encouraging as it works to help pull the nation out of recession.

Local housing officials, hoping for federal money to bolster their work, said HUD could use Olneyville as a model for how to rebuild other communities. “There is a whole lot more than [providing] a house for a family that is going on here,” said Frank Shea, executive director of the Olneyville Housing Corporation, a nonprofit housing developer.

HUD's deputy secretary, Ronald C. Sims, who toured the area Friday, seemed to be in agreement. “We have to have sustainable and livable communities in every American

metropolitan area,” Sims said at a news briefing at the headquarters of Olneyville Housing. “Rhode Island has been doing it right and been doing it for a long time.”

Sims was in Providence for a first-hand look at some of the neighborhood projects paid for with grants from HUD, the federal economic stimulus program and local community partnerships.

Among them was the headquarters of Olneyville Housing and YouthBuild, a renovated historic building on Chaffee Street completed last year thanks to a \$400,000 federal Community Development Block Grant. YouthBuild is a work-force development program that helps young adults (ages 16 to 24) earn their General Equivalency Diplomas and learn construction skills.

Sims also visited Riverside Park in Olneyville, where a three-block stretch along the formerly industrial Woonasquatucket River has been reclaimed as a riverside park — complete with a bike path, fish ladders and a community garden — and new low-income houses and apartments.

He drove down Broad Street in South Providence, where a number of building projects are creating construction jobs and reinvestment along one of the city’s major commercial thoroughfares.

Federal stimulus money has been “put to good use” to “reclaim this neighborhood,” said U.S. Rep. James R. Langevin, who caught up with the tour at Olneyville Housing’s office.

Local housing agencies also explained to Sims how their more collaborative approach to community development is at the root of their success in Olneyville and South Providence.

Richard Godfrey, executive director of Rhode Island Housing, said that HUD’s new direction under President Obama “aligns very closely” with what housing and community development agencies have been working on for the last two years in Rhode Island.

Under the Keep Space Initiative, local agencies are working to make sure that all the elements of a sustainable community — good housing options, healthy environment, job opportunities and transportation — are in place in some of the most challenging neighborhoods in the state, including Olneyville.

“It’s not enough to build four walls for a house,” said Godfrey. “It’s also about the community around it.”

In the same way, the Obama administration’s Sustainable Communities Initiative is looking to integrate housing, transportation, infrastructure renewable energy and environmental goals into community planning efforts.

The White House has committed \$150 million to the initiative, which is being led by HUD, the federal Department of Transportation and the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

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