

Katherine Kersten: Down for count, the North Side took new look at old assumptions

By [KATHERINE KERSTEN](#), Star Tribune

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Everyone knows north Minneapolis: broken down houses, peeling paint, couches in the yard. And everyone knows what comes with living on the North Side: drugs, crime, fear and decay. For decades, the assumption has been that North Side poverty makes chaos inevitable.

As Don Samuels looked for ways to improve his blighted neighborhood in 2001, he got fed up with these assumptions. "The thinking was, 'We can't hold poor people to high standards,'" he said. "So everything slides."

Samuels saw the consequences right around the corner: A rented storefront being used by drug lords who terrorized law-abiding neighbors.

"The police said they couldn't fix it. The City Council thought they didn't have the support to fix it -- to take the political risk," he explained.

So Samuels and his desperate neighbors took matters into their own hands. They drove to Medicine Lake to picket the landlord's home, passing out fliers that said, "Your neighbor is a drug landlord."

"We left notices nailed to his trees," said Samuels. The tenant was gone in a week, he says.

Few North Side residents have the time or energy for such direct action. In 2003, Samuels ran for the City Council, hoping to put the city on the front lines of this battle. In 2006, an opportunity arose. A group of North Side residents invited the mayor, the police chief and other officials to a meeting in someone's living room. "They poured out their hearts," recalled Samuels, documenting the unkempt homes and problem stores that were spawning crime and ruining property values.

City officials left with a new resolve. Thus was born NorthForce, a "collaborative, cross-departmental" effort to find innovative ways to address North Side challenges.

Listen up, folks: I don't exactly make a habit of praising collaborative, cross-departmental efforts dreamed up by DFLers.

But this is different.

Rocco Forte, coordinator of regulatory services and Minneapolis' former fire chief, brought a fresh philosophy to the task. "When you're fighting a fire, you throw as many resources at it as possible," he said. "The key is not to let the fire -- the problem -- grow."

A central premise of the new initiative was to treat North Siders with the dignity they deserve. Residents "get the same regulatory service as the rest of the city, and are held to the same standards of keeping their homes clean, up to date and safe," said Forte.

In June 2006, the city launched a curb-to-alley sweep to identify housing code violations. All 26,438 homes on the North Side were inspected, uncovering 38,228 violations -- everything from peeling paint to unmowed grass.

At the same time, the city restructured fines for non-compliance. In the past, Samuels explains, a homeowner might be fined \$30 for failing to do repair work that would cost \$2,000. "People would just pay the fine and not do the work." Now the fines double, and double again, until they reach \$2,000.

'We'll work with you'

If a homeowner "is making steady progress [on a violation], we'll work with you -- give you extra time to resolve the issue," said Forte. "But if things are not moving forward, we'll throw the book at you."

The housing sweeps spurred an outcry. "We had many people crying, 'We're poor, we can't afford this,'" said Samuels.

But the result was extraordinary -- a 96 percent compliance rate within a year. Residents who had once complained were delighted with the new sense of order, and began e-mailing thank-yous to regulatory services.

"People didn't think it could be done," said Forte. Why? "Because it had never been done before."

One of the initiative's greatest benefits was safer neighborhoods. Many non-compliant houses, it turned out, were magnets for unlawful activity. In 2005, the city revoked only one rental license. In 2007, it revoked 69. Crime around these problem homes has plunged, says Samuels.

The goal of the city's new initiative is to raise standards and change expectations. In a recent public meeting, Samuels said, a woman accosted him about being evicted from a house that she had shared with violent drug dealers. "You threw me out of my home," he said she charged. "I have kids. What kind of heartless man are you?"

Samuels didn't flinch. "The two single moms across the street from you -- two taxpayers -- called me and told me they were leaving the community because of activities around your house. I hope that when you go to your next place and have the privilege of living in a wholesome community, you'll begin to think: 'I can't act crazy or I'll lose my home again.'"

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