Hundreds help spruce up their Detroit neighborhood.

By Matt Helms
Detroit Free Press

Detroit—As many college freshmen spend their spare time exploring their new campuses this first week of school, freshmen at University of Detroit Mercy are exploring their new neighborhood.

Actually, hundreds of incoming UDM freshmen have spent the last two days doing more than just exploring; they’re helping spruce up the Fitzgerald neighborhood adjacent to the Jesuit college on the city’s west side.

The Fitzgerald neighborhood near Livernois and McNichols is the subject of a big revitalization project the city is undertaking, with hopes of private companies coming in to fix up salvageable abandoned homes along with turning vacant lots into community parks and gathering spots, gardens, meadows and flowers.

At the heart of the project is the transformation of a cluster of vacant lots in the middle of the neighborhood into a Central Park, with a paved walking path on greenways that would straddle the neighborhood and run from UDM to Marygrove College to the west, allowing more interaction between the schools and the community, said the Rev. Tim. Hippsknd, UDM’s director of service learning.

As part of their orientation, more than 300 students took to the streets of Fitzgerald, cleaning debris from alleys and streets, painting a bike path that will be part of the Livernois and McNichols corridors.

The students also surveyed the condition of sidewalks on the nine streets in the project area, bordered by McNichols to the north, Livernois to the east, Puritan to the south and Woodingham to the west.

Detroit is working with foundations and others to fund the major landscaping upgrades and putting out requests to the private sector to rehabilitate dozens of homes in the neighborhood, with an eye toward a workforce-development component that would provide jobs and training to people who live in Fitzgerald, said Alexa Bazzi, a planner and landscape architect in the city’s Planning and Development Department. She said the city has too few resources to deal with fallow land and vacant homes that aren’t generating taxes. “We need to come up with really creative ways to deal with that,” Bush said. “We are open to innovative ways to deal with the challenges we face.”

Students sweating through a muggy morning today, some with shovels, others with paintbrushes. “It feels good to give back to the community, because we’re going to school in Detroit, so it’s good to give back to the people around our university,” said Mohamad Bazzi, 18, a biology and pre-dentistry student from Dearborn.

Bazzi was with a group of students clearing out an alley. A couple of streets away, Susan Magaña, a freshman from Auburn Hills who’s studying electrical engineering, painted on the boards covering a door and a window on the 16000 block of San Juan. “I enjoy this,” said Magaña, 18. “I feel it’s important to help the community. They’re there for us, so we should be there for them.”

Wayne Barnett, 58, who has lived on Monica Street since 1968, said he has seen the neighborhood change drastically through the years. He said he mows several vacant lots near his home and he and other neighbors will get their lawnmowers together to tackle other lots when the weeds begin to grow too high. He said he’s familiar with the city’s revitalization plan for Fitzgerald and he hopes that it helps bring back what once was a vibrant place. And he gave thanks to the students for their contribution to that effort. “Whatever they’re doing right now, I appreciate it,” Barnett said. “It will help change the neighborhood around the area, as a way to introduce them back to the community, because we’re going to school in Detroit, so it’s good to give back to the people around our university,” said Mohamad Bazzi, 18, a biology and pre-dentistry student from Dearborn.

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Hippsknd said each year UDM freshmen are put to work on community projects, usually smaller ones spread out around the area, as a way to introduce them to the university’s Jesuit mission of service.

But this year, the school, which has about 5,000 students, had the entire freshman class work only on the Fitzgerald project, which Hippsknd said is a top priority for university President Antoine Garibaldi, who’s also involved in the nonprofit planning and development agency Livable Alliances efforts to redevelop the McNichols and Livernois corridors.

“Part of our vision is we want to be distinguished by graduates who lead, serve and make a difference in their communities,” Hippsknd said. “We want them to know that from day one, that this is kind of part of our DNA. The fact that we’re in Detroit is a choice, and we really believe we want to be engaged with the city.”

The Central Park and greenway portion of the project is expected to be finished in 2017, Hippsknd said.

The volunteer work was in partnership with the city and The Greening of Detroit, a nonprofit focused on creating green spaces in Detroit and well as providing food, education, training and job opportunities.


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