

New federal program offers promise for Ogden neighborhoods

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JaNae Francis

TODAY IS THE FIRST IN A THREE-PART SERIES: *A budding community transformation program may result in a \$35 million shot in the arm if Ogden proponents can complete the deal for big federal funding.*

MONDAY *Improving education is the core of the Ogden United Promise Neighborhood project.*

TUESDAY *Students can't succeed unless their basic needs are met, so Ogden United Promise Neighborhood is out to fix the community.*

OGDEN -- A vision of this city being a well-guarded secret oasis is nothing new.

Leaders have long championed Ogden, bringing business from around the world.

But now, they say they have an opportunity to plant this flower box from within like never before.

Their efforts are based on a chance at up to \$35 million in federal funds sure to transform the inner workings of the town.

And even if those funds are never granted, they say Ogden will never be the same as a result.

"I've read some studies that say 70 to 80 percent of business growth is from right in your own community," said Ogden Mayor Mike Caldwell. "Businesses that are here and are growing and are successful and can hire the right educated workforce are a huge force."

The program is called Ogden United Promise Neighborhood. The effort is the result of a federal program in which Ogden was awarded \$500,000 to study ways to transform the community.

The effort is a partnership between the main sponsors United Way of Northern Utah, Ogden School District and Ogden city as well as a host of other contributors, including Weber State University.

An advisory board is comprised of community leaders representing key sponsors and other lead organizations in the community.

Seven committees are made up of the leadership of community organizations, which are addressing health and wellness, early childhood, K-12 grades, college and career, youth development, financial stability, revitalization housing and employment.

Promise Neighborhood is a program to study a 5-mile area of most need in Ogden, from east to west, roughly from Harrison Boulevard to 1900 West. On the north, there is a small piece starting at 9th Street but largely from 12th Street to 44th Street on the west side and to 36th Street on the east.

In that area are 12,035 total households and about 8,000 kids to study.

"It lets us dig down deeper and address the root cause of the problem," said Scott Ericson, community planning specialist for Ogden United Promise Neighborhood.

And the results of the study will compete with nine other cities across the nation awarded the same initial grant amount.

Leslie Herold, executive director of collective impact at United Way of Northern Utah, said probably six of the cities will receive additional funds a year from now on earmarked for transformation.

If Ogden impresses the decision makers enough and receives the highest level of funding, the city could get as much as \$7 million a year for five years.

"It's a mixed bag," said Reed Richards, chairman of Ogden United, about Ogden's efforts to obtain the funding. "You want to be working on the issue but you want the people giving you the money to see that there is work still to be done."

And \$35 million, Herold said, is enough to transform Ogden into something even more beautiful than the vision of its leaders.

Primarily geared toward education, the goal of the national Promise Neighborhood program is to provide the foundation for children to do well in school.

"From cradle to college to community: preparing our kids for bright futures" is the slogan Ogden United Promise Neighborhood uses to best describe the effort.

And the way to assure that children have an opportunity to succeed in school, Ogden's core team for the effort says, is to not only provide the educational resources they need but also to meet the needs of the community in which they live.

"Making Ogden cool is important for improving education," said former Mayor Matthew Godfrey, who now is CEO of Better City and just one of a host of volunteers in the effort. "We knew we had to raise the educational prowess of the community to have sustainable-wage jobs."

The \$500,000 Ogden already was awarded was based on efforts already in place and past successes.

"The fact that Ogden was chosen for this grant is huge," Herold said. "One of the reasons we got the grant is because of what we have going for us. We can turn a curve and turn it quickly."

She said those who administer the funds want them to go where they will do the most good, and Ogden is a good bet.

She and others point to the energy now being generated around Ogden United Promise Neighborhood as a perfect storm that they believe will put Ogden on the map like never before.

"Ogden already is seen as a model community for change," Herold said. "We're already being watched as a place where people can make a difference."

Ogden United Promise Neighborhood didn't just spring up overnight when it was funded. The effort was a natural outgrowth of Ogden United Community Schools, which has been going for a handful of years.

That effort brought community resources, such as health care and after-school programs, right into the schools so children could learn in a safe environment where their needs were being met.

And there were other grass-roots efforts even before that.

And thanks to the trust such collaboration has earned for Ogden, the Promise Neighborhood award was received in December.

First on the agenda were a dozen conversations within the various neighborhoods with residents gathered to give their insights, as well as surveys of the residents.

These surveys have come about through a partnership with Weber State University's Center for Community Engaged Learning. In collaboration with the University of Utah research department, the center and volunteers have designed a way to not only gather the information but also to present the data in a way that is understandable and usable for those who wish to make a difference.

Volunteers are nearly through the process of door-to-door surveying of about 750 of the families in the Promise Neighborhood with children.

The information the surveys are bringing in is crucial, say project leaders.

But something compelling started to happen as volunteers began administering the surveys.

Herold said those being asked the questions, in large numbers, said they wanted to be a part of finding the answers.

"We probably missed the boat," she said about the need to engage interested volunteers immediately. "We learned a great lesson. All you can do is go on."

Newly printed brochures now tell about the program and give phone numbers and resources where those interested in participating may turn.

The colorful handouts list 10 promises the program seeks to achieve and offers a card future volunteers can fill out and hand to the surveyors listing their contact information and offering a checklist of ways to volunteer.

That checklist includes helping at school, providing school safety, acting as a crossing guard, serving on neighborhood committees, coordinating parent engagement and receiving training for additional skills.

Those being surveyed now and in the next few months also will receive these resources as they answer the questions.

Anyone interested in helping with the effort is invited to call the United Way of Northern Utah offices at 801-399-5584 to register as a volunteer. Visit oupn.org for more information.

Being asked the questions, simply what they like and what they don't like about their neighborhood and what they consider to be their neighborhood, has spawned enthusiasm among the survey participants.

"It's been empowering for folks to realize that we care what they really think. ... We're focusing on the positive," Ericson said. "A lot of times in tough neighborhoods, people focus on the crime and the bad things going on."

And pointing out the positives was easy for Leona and Bill Lein when they were surveyed by United Way of Northern Utah President Bob Hunter.

Hunter talked to them Tuesday at the first of a number of community outreach efforts to collect surveys and information. These efforts will look and feel like parties.

Tuesday, as parents picked up their children from Boys & Girls Club or dropped them off for evening recreation programs at Odyssey Elementary School, they were served pizza and popsicles and asked for their opinions.

The Leins listed quiet, good neighbors and many longtime residents as the plus side of their west Ogden neighborhood.

"Everyone watches out for everyone else," Leona Lein said. "We love that."

The couple moved to west Ogden in 2010 in order to raise their grandchildren following their daughter's death. They reported being very happy with their decision to move to Ogden.

And they also reported enthusiasm for the possibility of changes to address their concerns over where their grandkids have to catch the school bus.

Those doing the surveys also report undergoing a mighty change in the way they see their community.

"Being a part of the Ogden United Promise Neighborhood program has done more than impact my life, it has completely revolutionized it," Nicci Spjut, a Weber State University student who is overseeing the survey effort, wrote in a letter to United Way of Northern Utah.

"Over the last six months, I've had the privilege of participating in multiple focus groups, the development and execution of the survey, and first-hand access to the feedback we're receiving. I live in a highly diverse neighborhood within the (Promise Neighborhood) footprint and I can feel the energy in my friends and neighbors as they realize there is not only hope for their neighborhoods, but that they too can be a part of creating this positive change."

And Herold said even without any additional funding coming their way, the various resources in the community started to come together in an unprecedented way as they listened to what people were saying about their community.

Some of these changes were:

- * Finding residents in the neighborhood who are excited to provide insights into how to make their neighborhood better;
- * Mapping the interconnectivity of services and identifying opportunities for increased collaboration;
- * Identifying strategies; and

- * Looking at practices that align with the needs of specific populations.

EDUCATIONAL COMMITMENTS

- * Children enter kindergarten ready to learn.
- * Students improve academic performance and are proficient in core subjects.
- * Students successfully transition from elementary to junior to high school.
- * Youths graduate from high school.
- * High school graduates obtain post-secondary degree or trade certification.
- * Students are healthy and access learning and enrichment activities.
- * Students feel safe at school and in their community
- * Students live in stable communities.
- * Families and community members support learning within schools.
- * Students have access to 21st-century learning tools.

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