

Residents prepare for revival of Old King's Orchard neighborhood

By **KENNETH LOWE** -- H&R Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, May 24, 2011 12:28 am

DECATUR — Monday's party at the Old King's Orchard Community Center wasn't just about celebrating the approaching summer or the facility's upcoming 10th anniversary. It was also an opportunity for city personnel and other neighborhood allies to take the first step in a plan to revitalize the surrounding community.

Old King's Orchard was selected as the site of the city of Decatur's pilot study in the Sustainability Plan, a broad program that aims to reclaim vacant lots, promote recycling, and make more efficient use of energy, land, and water.

The community center's president, Alida Graham, said Monday's event was about getting the process started.

"Sustainability is not just about recycling or 'going green,'" Graham told the crowd gathered in the center's gym. "All of this fits in with the vision and mission we're trying to achieve here."

The city partnered with a private firm to craft a study on ways to improve neighborhoods with an eye toward energy and land efficiency, then selected Old King's Orchard as the first place to move forward with the plan. Neighborhood organization members helped the company create a block-by-block map of the community, highlighting vacant lots, abandoned homes and community assets like parks and churches.

The pilot plan calls for apple trees to be planted outside the community center, rain gardens and parks to be created in a number of vacant lots throughout the area, and a push to encourage residents to sign up for the city's recycling program.

Children played outside in the sun as neighbors went to different stations that explained aspects of the plan and asked them to sign up to participate. Those who hit all stations got a free dinner.

City engineer Mary Cave explained the benefit of rain gardens and rain barrels to residents, both part of the pilot plan's water conservation strategy. In addition to giving a block a splash of color, rain gardens also filter pollutants out of water and abate flooding, she said.

"The cleaner the water, the less effort it takes to filter," Cave said. "Rain gardens also keep pollutants off of the streets."

Sheryol Threewit, director of the city's anti-crime Weed and Seed Program, said the proposed changes are welcome in Old King's Orchard. She said reclaiming shuttered properties and converting vacant lots doesn't just make a neighborhood prettier, but safer.

"Somebody will move in to a boarded up house and commit crimes," Threewit said. "Nobody wants to move into a home that's next to a vacant lot. Anything that makes this community grow, I'm in agreement with."

5/24/2011

Residents prepare for revival of Old Ki...

klowe@herald-review.com|421-7985