



MARK GUSS/Tribune photo

Phil Santmyer, right, and Dean Muse prepare wrought-iron signs Friday as part of Operation Commitment, a city initiative aimed at improving the Kenwood and Palmetto Park neighborhoods in St. Petersburg.

Goodwill, iron will propel cleanup project

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ST. PETERSBURG — Call it the carrot and stick approach.

Two of the city's neighborhoods, both of which launch improvement efforts today, are trying to inspire homeowners to mow their lawns, paint their homes and keep their yards neat.

But if the goodwill and lead-by-example approach doesn't work, there's always the stick. That's where code enforcement and police officers come in.

Palmetto Park and Kenwood neighborhoods, which represent a sizable chunk of the city's interior, will try out their carrot-and-stick method as part of the city's Operation Commitment, a government-sponsored initiative.

Their kick-off events, both scheduled to start today, will focus largely on cleaning up yards, landscaping street corners and adding some

physical touches such as wrought-iron signs.

The idea, said Kenwood Neighborhood Association President Robert Jeffrey, is to inspire homeowners to follow a simple example.

"A lot of people don't realize that this neighborhood could look good," he said. But if they don't follow the example, and they let their properties slide, a code enforcement officer will offer another kind of reminder.

Code officers will make a yearlong sweep through the neighborhood, Jeffrey said, surveying each property. In Kenwood, the hope is to put more properties in the hands of homeowners, as opposed to landlords.

The goals in Palmetto Park aren't much different. There, said neighborhood association President Kevin Johnson, the focus is on improving neighborhood pride.

By cleaning up trash and creating a team of

City committed to cleanup

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volunteers, Johnson said he hopes he can get people focused on issues like recreation for children, housing and fighting crime.

"We have to come up with some special solutions," he said of the area's efforts. His long-range goals, he said, include setting up a men's program, improving street lighting and a special code enforcement program that will emphasize neighbor-to-neighbor assistance.

Police will also try to stem drug traffic in the area, said Mike Dove, the city's neighborhood partnership director.

Helping, it seems, is where the city can have its strongest impact. The two neighborhoods, which together make the Central Neighborhood, will be the fourth and fifth to receive Operation Commitment as-

sistance from the city.

City grants pay for much of the landscaping improvements, and a special team of city employees will help coordinate the efforts in both communities.

That help can be useful, but it won't solve every problem, cautioned one veteran of the city's neighborhood program.

"It provides a great lift," said David Prior, crime-watch coordinator for the Uptown Neighborhood, which was the first to receive Operation Commitment attention. "But it's very hard for the city to manage a lot of programs at once."

Coordinating the city's garbage trucks, police and fire departments and code enforcement officers takes a lot of work, and once another neighborhood is added to the stew, Prior said the veteran neighborhoods need to pick up the slack.

Only if homeowners put in the effort, he said, will they see crime go down, property values go up and neighborhood appearance improve.

Palmetto Park is between 24th and 34th streets, from First Avenue to Eighth Avenue South. The Kenwood neighborhood is between Interstate 275 and 31st Street, from First Avenue to Ninth Avenue North.

Kenwood's cleanup effort begins today at 9 a.m. At 4 p.m., volunteers will congregate for a free picnic at Seminole Park, 29th Street and Third Avenue North. Anyone interested should call 321-6387.

Palmetto Park's volunteers and city crews will meet at 9 a.m. at the Tot Lot, 27th Street and Fourth Avenue South. The cleanup will be followed by a free picnic, also at the Tot Lot, which will be held at 11:30 a.m. Anyone interested should call Kevin Johnson at 321-6385.