

Hartford's North End Designated Federal 'Promise Zone'

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HARTFORD — A 3-mile swath of north Hartford has been named a federal Promise Zone, a designation that local leaders hope will spark an infusion of manpower and money to one of the capital city's neediest areas.

City and federal officials announced the designation for the Clay Arsenal, Northeast and Upper Albany neighborhoods at a press conference Tuesday outside the old M. Swift & Sons factory, a long-standing target for revitalization that is again flush with attention.

Being a Promise Zone means that north Hartford would get "priority consideration" for federal funding, said Nani A. Coloretti, a deputy secretary for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. It does not guarantee government money.

Instead, a federal liaison will be assigned to Hartford's zone to help the city apply for existing grant programs, and five AmeriCorps VISTA anti-poverty workers will be on the ground to help oversee volunteers, officials said.

"I can't overstate how important this designation will be to kids, families and business owners in the North End," said Sen. **Chris Murphy**, D-Conn., part of a coalition that worked on the city's proposal for nearly a year.

The urban renewal plan, developed by city agencies, community groups, businesses and advocates, focuses on lowering crime, creating jobs, offering more affordable housing and education, improving health and spurring economic development in the Hartford zone.

A centerpiece is converting the former Swift gold-leafing factory on Love Lane, owned by the nonprofit group Community Solutions, into a "state of the art" urban farm and food service center that would feature a commercial kitchen, a teaching kitchen and a business incubator to nurture start-up companies, Coloretti said. The roof would become a hydroponic growing facility to support jobs year-round.

After securing \$2 million to restore the building, supporters said they need an extra \$12 million in tax credits, government grants and low-interest loans to finish the job.

Hartford leaders described the 3-mile area, which begins near Homestead Avenue and extends north to Keney Park, as the most troubled enclave in one of the country's poorest cities, slow to recover from the construction of the I-84 viaduct in the mid-1960s that physically divided the neighborhoods from downtown and the 1968 riots that destroyed businesses after the assassination of the Rev. **Martin Luther King Jr.**

"The area was once home to a mixed-income community, a vibrant commercial area and a strong manufacturing base," Mayor **Pedro Segarra** wrote in a letter to HUD Secretary **Julian**

Castro last fall. "Over time, the factories closed, more affluent families moved elsewhere, unemployment and crime increased, and housing deteriorated."

Out of 17 Hartford neighborhoods, the zone is beset with the highest rates for obesity, heart disease, infections and infant mortality, the city said in its application. "Pervasive poverty" — residents' per capita income in this area is \$12,099 compared to \$16,286 citywide — and violence have crippled families. About 39 percent of the city's 2013 homicides occurred in the north Hartford zone, officials noted.

But there also is deep pride in the culturally rich community anchored by families, entrepreneurs and other residents who care, said Darlene Robertson-Childs, chairwoman of the Northeast neighborhood revitalization group.

"This is and will always be our home. ... Being here today and getting this designation did not just happen. It happened as a result of a lot of talking, a lot of discussion and a lot of hard work together," Robertson-Childs said. "Now that we have this attention, it's on all of us to leverage this opportunity to transform our neighborhood. It's up to us to do the work. ... This is only the beginning."

Hartford's Promise Zone plan is all-encompassing, with proposals that include investments in mixed-use development, such as cleaning up blighted industrial sites, improving streets in commercial districts and creating competitive loan programs for businesses; and mental health services for children who have been exposed to violence.

Additional STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) classes and science opportunities for students are also in the plan, along with literacy programs for children and adults; more help for new and expectant mothers and children in low-income households; and counseling for first-time home buyers and homeowners in financial trouble.

Without guaranteed federal grants for the Promise Zone, a key will be marshaling together the resources from agencies and nonprofit groups already working in the Clay Arsenal, Northeast and Upper Albany neighborhoods.

Organizations that have committed to a partnership through the North Hartford Promise Zone include the city public schools, police, Hartford Public Library, Hartford Housing Authority, Community Solutions, United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut, Capital Workforce Partners, Connecticut Center for Advanced Technology, Greater Hartford YMCA and the Village for Families and Children.

"It's not just a name; it's not just a logo that will be the North Hartford Promise Zone," Murphy said. "It really is an army of support and help that's going to make this vision become real..."

"We have a lot of wealth surrounding this neighborhood within a stone's throw, and for a long time people could just close their eyes to challenges that families face here," Murphy continued. "The Promise Zone gives us an opportunity to go out to people of means, to organizations of means, to companies of means, to tell them that we now have a federal investment in this neighborhood like we have never had before. We have a reason for you to invest alongside us."

President Barack Obama introduced the Promise Zone initiative in his 2013 State of the Union

address, calling for tax breaks to businesses that hire unemployed workers and a plan to "partner with 20 of the hardest-hit towns in America to get these communities back on their feet."

Congress has not enacted those tax breaks, but Segarra said the "designation has the potential to spur more economic activity and improve the quality of life for generations."

"Today is my birthday and this is the best birthday gift that has come to me in my whole existence," Segarra said.

Superintendent **Beth Schiavino-Narvaez** said that federal investments could help in the struggle to establish educational equity in the city school system.

"There still remains a vast disparity of performance — and resources — between our magnet schools and our neighborhood schools, particularly in the northern part of Hartford," Narvaez said in a statement.

Hartford was one of eight communities chosen for the federal designation this year from a field of 123 applicants, federal officials said. The others are Minneapolis; Sacramento, Calif.; Indianapolis; Camden, N.J.; St. Louis and St. Louis County, Mo.; Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, S.D.; and the South Carolina Lowcountry.

In 2014, the first five communities picked for the Promise Zone were Los Angeles, San Antonio, Philadelphia, southeastern Kentucky and the rural Choctaw Nation in southeast Oklahoma.

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