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HOPE inspires hope in southside's future

At a recent meeting of a committee working to redevelop south Muncie, landscape architect Deane Rundell made an insightful comment: 'Perception can be reality. We need to change the perception [of south Muncie].' Three days later, perception made a huge gain when word came that the planned rebuilding of Munsyana Homes would become reality, thanks to a \$12.3-million HOPE VI grant from the federal government.

Munsyana, a federal housing project dating to the early 1950s, is at the northern end of the south side. It is bisected by Madison Street, near First and Second streets. The housing is for low-income residents, and it has needed replacing for several years. Two earlier efforts to obtain HOPE VI funds failed, although the Muncie Housing Association started a portion of the replacement project -- called Millennium Place -- with MHA modernization and state tax credit financing to build 30 units. Eventually the rest of Munsyana will be demolished and replaced, clearing the way for new apartments, commercial development, and a nearby townhouse project for seniors.

Efforts to snag the HOPE money have been difficult but productive. Several people, including MHA officials Charles Weatherly and Jerome Williams and Ball State University consultant Olon Dotson, have been with the project for many months. The housing authority also has a private developer, F&C Real Estate Services, Indianapolis, helping with the project. So far, it is an excellent marriage of public/private interests. City officials believe the project will spur development in the near-downtown area and into south-central Muncie. Positive change is badly needed in south Muncie, an area rocked recently by the closing of the Kmart in Southway Plaza.

The task force addressed by Rundell on Friday will be important in turning things around economically. So far, southside residents and Mayor Dan Canan have shown considerable interest in identifying needs and making suggestions. Last week, Canan said his administration would seek a \$2-million federal transportation grant to improve infrastructure and beautify routes leading to south Muncie. The mayor also said the city could help with a spring cleanup in the area. Others have suggested that new businesses are needed, particularly to fill some of the vacant buildings along South Madison. But first things first. The committee has sounded an important call -- for improving the looks of the south side, and perhaps the mindset.

In other areas of Muncie where housing stock or residential activity have declined, residents have gone to work on self-improvement projects. These can be noted in both the eastside and westside historical areas, and in the east-central neighborhood. While the southside has yet to approach this level of self-help, that will be important to its redevelopment success, as will cooperation and good communication with public and private interests. Together, they can make south Muncie vital again.