



# 49507! Project



Fair Housing Center of West Michigan

June 2015

**The Fair Housing Center of West Michigan** (FHCWM) is a private, non-profit fair housing organization providing education and enforcement services to protect the right to choose housing free from unlawful discrimination. Discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, familial or marital status is illegal in the sale or rental of housing, and in related lending and insurance transactions.



## BACKGROUND

In 2013, FHCWM joined the National Fair Housing Alliance (NFHA) and 19 of its members in a partnership with Wells Fargo NA, for resources to promote homeownership, strengthen neighborhoods and promote diverse communities. Based on several years of professional investigation, this agreement settled a 2012 federal fair housing complaint filed with the US Department of Housing & Urban Development. The Center, NFHA and its members alleged illegal racial and national origin discrimination based on significant differences in maintenance and marketing of properties in predominantly White v African-American and Latino neighborhoods in the Grand Rapids metro area, along with other sites throughout the country.

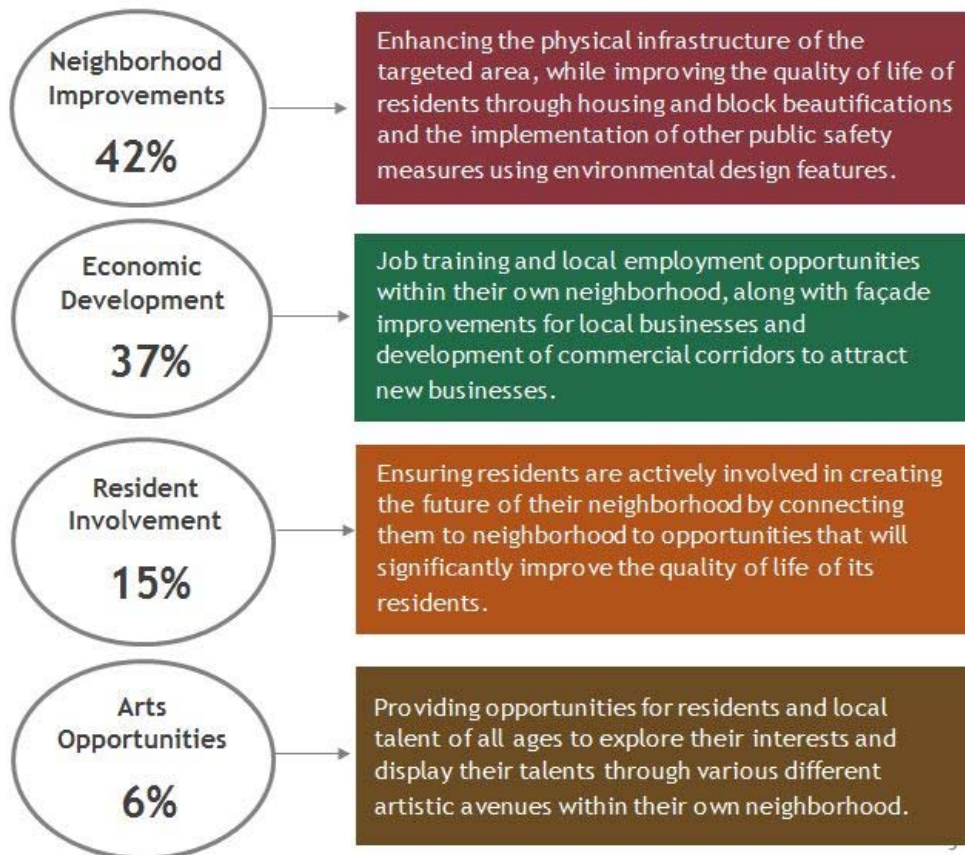
This landmark settlement regarding equality in the maintenance and marketing of *real estate owned (REO)* properties owned by banks, investors, Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, FHA or the Veterans Administration as a result of foreclosure represents an important step forward in rebuilding severely affected communities.

The Center received \$1.42million for a neighborhood stabilization effort, and \$170,000 in agency damages from Wells Fargo NA, as part of the \$42million total settlement. Resources were quickly directed to a small, densely populated area in the 49507 zip code, bounded by Eastern, Burton, Division and Hall on GR's southeast side. The comprehensive effort, "**49507!**", was designed to address a maximum number of social determinants intersecting with housing and opportunity, through strong contract partnerships with existing neighborhood assets – leveraging modest investment to strengthen a community and highlight the potential for social, economic and environmental progress.

The 2-year project focused on **Housing, Health & Education, and Economic & Environmental Development**. A broad array of partners, nearly all rooted in the neighborhood, included:

- City of Grand Rapids
- Friends of Grand Rapids Parks
- Grand Valley State University
- Healthy Homes, Inc.
- Kent County Land Bank Authority
- MoHawk Real Estate, Inc.
- Tazzia Lawn Care
- Next Step of West Michigan
- Dickinson School/GR Public Schools
- Garfield Park Neighborhoods Association
- Habitat for Humanity of Kent County
- Inner City Christian Federation (ICCF)
- LINC, Inc.
- Seidman Boys & Girls Club
- The Right Place, Inc.





The FHCWM contracted with LINC, Inc. to actively engage 49507 neighbors in identifying short-term community priorities, needs, and opportunities. Ultimately, over 250 residents took part in a series of interactive sessions and conversations describing a vision of lower crime, more job opportunities, higher walkability, affordable housing, a neighborhood park, and additional street lights. Items including a credit union, amphitheater, child care, recreation programming, and a community center were elements of a longer timeline.

When questioned as to “How to spend \$1 million?”, residents invested as follows:

- Almost \$400,000 in physical infrastructure, including housing rehab, block beautification, and public-safety oriented environmental design features;
- \$370,000 toward job training and employment opportunities in the neighborhood, and development, including façade improvements, in commercial corridors;
- \$170,000 in active resident involvement, connecting people to potential quality of life improvements; and
- The balance of \$70,000 to promote artistic avenues for local talent of all ages and types.



NEIGHBORHOOD  
PRIORITIES

Project  
49507!





## Housing and Homeownership

A total of 14 single-family, residential properties in the 49507! focus area were purchased, renovated and listed for sale to owner-occupants by four respected partners from within the community:

Next Step of West MI      MoHawk Real Estate, Inc.  
LINC, Inc.      Kent County Land Bank Authority

Several have been sold as of the close of the project, with the balance being actively marketed as the limited supply of affordable housing creates growing demand. Homes were spread across the 40-block area. Four were located on the same or adjacent blocks, pushing values upward and prompting nearby property improvements. Despite challenges of a quickly rising market, short timeframe and tangled, sometimes impenetrable ownership situations, the 14 homes completed were an important piece of overall housing progress.

Working with Garfield Park Neighborhood Association and ICCF, 5 first time home buyers received down payment assistance of \$3,000 each to purchase homes in the neighborhood.

*LINC Community Revitalization, Inc.  
purchased and rehabbed these 3  
residences in key 49507! locations:*



709 Griggs SE



500 Dickinson SE



1649 Godwin SE

*Next Step of West Michigan purchased, rehabbed and sold 5  
properties to new homebuyers:*



1057 Dallas SE



Interior/Exterior—507 Ardmore SE



1032 Burton SE



441 Ardmore SE



1745 Linden SE



The Kent County Land Bank Authority purchased and rehabilitated 3 homes:



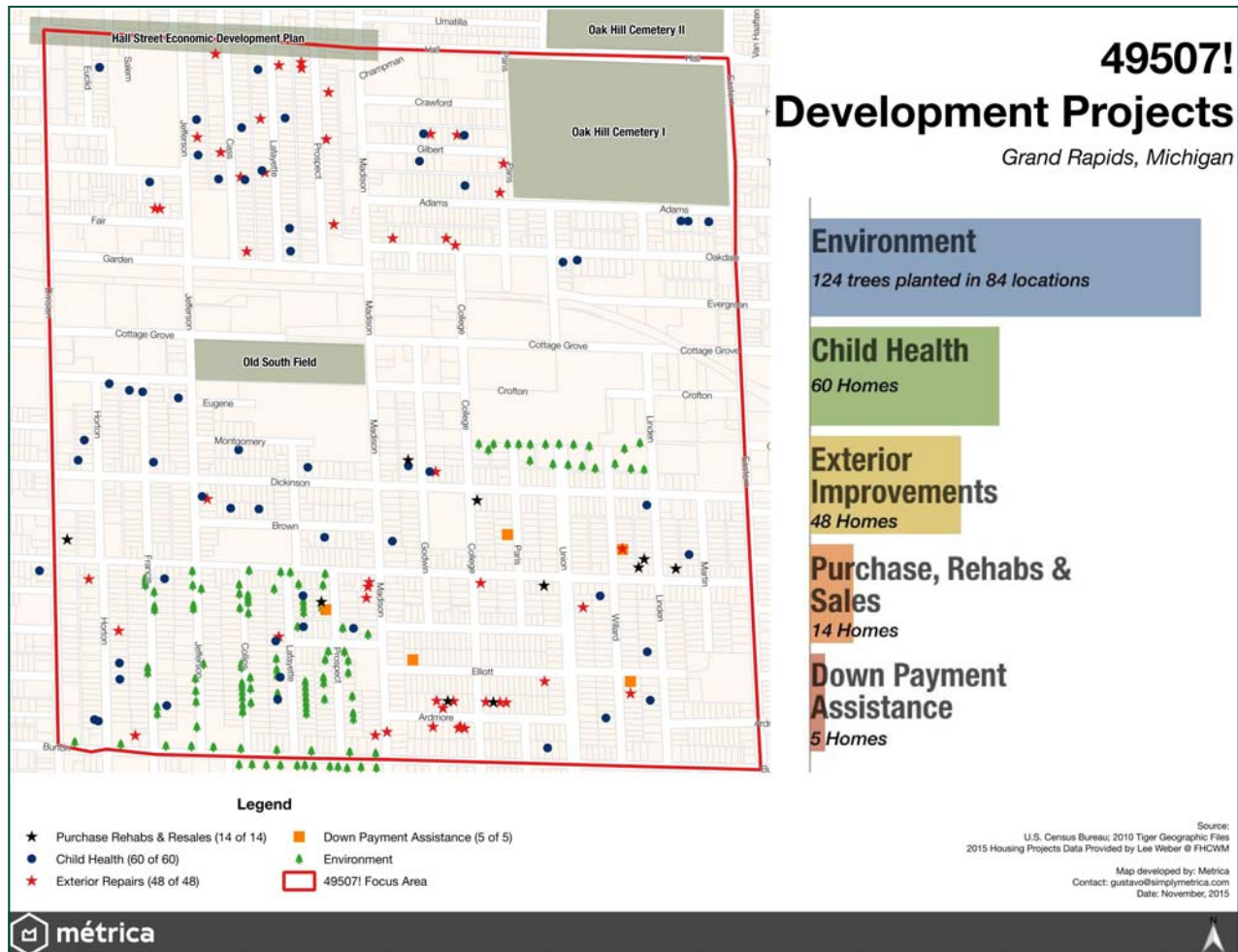
649 Griggs SE



546 Griggs SE



850 Elliott SE



MoHawk Construction purchased and rehabilitated 3 homes:



1823 Prospect SE



2202 Horton SE



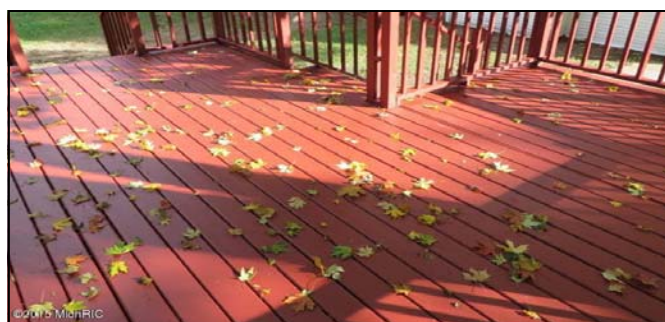
1748 Division S



Housing condition – particularly in an older neighborhood of predominantly low - and moderate-income residents – is a major challenge. By investing over \$120,000 in exterior home improvements, the Center not only responded to stated needs of neighbors but also boosted the impact of 14 nearby homes that were purchased, rehabbed, and resold by development partners. Improvements included caulking and paint, repair of broken concrete or wood steps, doors and screens, windows, railings, gutters, soffit and fascia, replacing mailboxes and house numbers, trimming overgrown bushes, and removing trash. Through a short-term effort with Habitat for Humanity (7 homes) and subsequent, longer term *Hope Through Work* program with Next Step of West Michigan, a total of 48 residences were improved at an average of less than \$3,000 per home.



Nearly all of the 2,000 homes in 49507! were built 70 or more years ago. In older neighborhoods, maintenance is always an issue, locally compounded by the high number of foreclosures, and lack of investment by the banks, lenders and service providers who took ownership. Most of the exterior work was completed by Next Step, and was much enhanced by the personal efforts of Floyd Willis, an outstanding neighbor who devoted himself to knocking doors, building trust, and promoting respect among owners, work crews and project partners. Largely through his work, the 49507! project was able to overcome the suspicions of residents who were skeptical of “free” home repairs and unfamiliar work crews.



Floyd Willis works from his heart. He is a longtime resident, and holds a deep and abiding sense of what it means to be a neighbor. Far beyond a simple geographic link, Floyd lives his belief that neighbors help one another, can lean on each other, and in many ways will sink or swim together. Long before the popularity of “It takes a village...”, Willis has stood up and spoken out for children’s safety and well-being.

The Center appreciates all of those who contributed to exterior improvements - Habitat, Next Step, supervisors and work crews, and is especially grateful to Floyd Willis for his quiet and effective leadership in treating people of all levels with respect.

*“These projects have blessed, and brought hope to so many who were living on the edge and looking for ways to maintain, and stay in their homes.” - F. Willis*



## HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND SAFETY

The 49507! project's focus on community well-being included the health, safety, and education of its children. Although impact of "quality of life" work can be difficult to measure, it tends to be long-lasting, and strongly supportive of positive growth in a young neighborhood.

Healthy Homes Coalition focused on residential environmental health affecting families with children, targeting efforts geographically and personally canvassing 95% of area residents. Results were significant:

- 61 families with children enrolled in *Healthy Homes for Kids* program;
- 53 households developed *Family-centered Action Plans* designed to resolve existing hazard issues;
- 57 families received intensive asthma-intervention and/or integrated pest management services;
- 13 households received "Get the Lead Out" treatment;
- 5 households used the *Energy and Health Intervention Program*, and each has been weatherized with attic insulation and sealing.



Community safety, especially concerning young people, was addressed through a leadership training curriculum developed and delivered by LINC, Inc. *STOP IT Youth Leadership Academy* is aimed at middle school students, and is designed to curb violence and support the principles and practices of the community-based STOP IT Initiative. Working closely with principals and Kent School Services Network (KSSN) Community School Coordinators, LINC recruited students and held a parent orientation to discuss the academy and encourage reinforcement at home. The 10-week training of weekly, 2-hour segments featured activities and discussion on a specific topic, and a local expert guest speaker. Improved social skills were reported by school staff at both Alger Middle and Dickinson Schools, where a total of 31 students completed the academy.

In cooperation with GRPS, Dickinson Academy, KSSN, and the City of Grand Rapids, the Center invested 49507! resources in the development and implementation of *Safe Routes to Dickinson Academy*, a recently-renovated elementary school serving much of the 49507! neighborhood. Safety concerns identified by parents, students, and staff related to traffic, vacant and/or abandoned homes, drug activity, stray/loose dogs, and traffic signals. With financial support from 49507!, the staff organized the information, developed plans, recruited volunteers to lead a “walking school bus”, addressed neighborhood and traffic trouble spots, and improved campus pick-up/drop-off procedures to enhance student safety.



Seidman Boys& Girls Club, a program of GR Youth Commonwealth at 139 Crofton SE, serves hundreds of area children in several summer and after-school activities led by an energetic staff. Programming is designed to ensure that all members are on track to high school graduation with a plan for their future, good character and citizenship, and a healthy lifestyle. 49507! partnered with the Club, providing facility improvement funds for paint, countertops, flooring, carpet, internet access, and communication systems along with support for summer arts programming, cameras, updated computers, and *LEGO Story* starter kits to develop language skills.

Additionally, Center staff taught more than 175 children from area families about fair housing, in 7 sessions for students from 6-17 years old. Each session included reading, activities, visual aids, discussion and materials designed to build a practical awareness of fair housing rights, particularly related to familial status protections and its adverse impact on local families.





## ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEVELOPMENT

Early in the 2-year project, the Center commissioned a comprehensive study of the 49507 zip code within the city of Grand Rapids. The *Target Market Analysis: 49507* addressed a geography larger than the 40-block focus area, covering approximately 6 square miles and containing 36,000 people. The study was designed to inform housing and related development and accompanying investment by various sources, in a contemporary, unbiased assessment of area housing stock, its affordability for low- and moderate income households, and potential revitalization opportunities. Upon completion, the study was distributed to all 49507! partners, and has been a valuable tool in identifying potential and encouraging investment.

### Highlights:

- 49507 is younger, has lower median incomes despite larger household sizes than surrounding areas;
- 25% of all households – and 44% of renters – make less than 30% of AMI (area median income);
- Most of area housing is single family, constructed before 1960;
- High demand for affordable housing, particularly rental housing as single-family sales rebound;
- High demand by “missing middle” for multi-family rental housing at both affordable and market rates, and, due to the age and condition of housing, construction of single-family homes would be recommended for those seeking a traditional, single-family detached product.



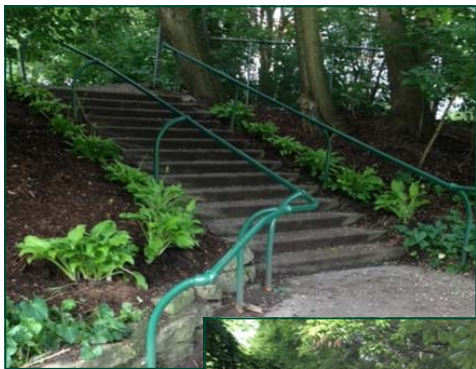
Hall Street is a major east-west route through the 49507! area, connecting to adjacent, mostly residential neighborhoods to the east, and to highway US131 and the Grandville Avenue corridor to the west. At one time it was a main thoroughfare in a thriving community, anchored by South High and busy commercial districts at each end. An assessment of the Hall Street Corridor, conducted by The Right Place and Progressive AE, surveyed residents and examined properties, physical characteristics, uses and infrastructure along the 6-block stretch.

The summary describes such corridors as, at one time, the center of a neighborhood’s social, commercial and cultural life. Following a long period of disinvestment and neglect, the area has deteriorated into a series of underused buildings and vacant lots. Now, renewed interest and an increasing sense of optimism provide a reason for hope, evident in new townhouse and mixed-use development, and the recently constructed Southtown Square.

### Findings include:

- Corridor lacks a variety of uses to serve residents;
- Isolated buildings, lack of storefronts and vacant properties deter pedestrian activity;
- Adding sidewalk space and amenities, higher maintenance and public gathering space could improve the streetscape;
- Manufacturing and food processing sites, Madison Square Library, Gerald R Ford Job Corps, local churches and new, mixed-use developments are important to the future of jobs, housing and quality of life in the neighborhood.





Developed as a “buffer” park, the City-owned greenspace stretches for three blocks, and lies between a light industrial area and the back of several homes facing Dickinson Street to the north. Despite the lack of greenspace in the surrounding neighborhood, the park is often underutilized. Parents and kids cited the lack of maintenance and repair, poor equipment, lack of programming and the isolated location of the park as barriers to its use.

The Center partnered with Friends of Grand Rapids Parks and Next Step of West Michigan to involve local families and promote interest in improving their park. With 49507! financial support and additional resources from the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (due to proximity to Silver Creek), crews cleaned up trash and debris, painted railings, edged pathways and courts, planted 20 trees, and installed a bench, grill and bike rack for public use. New landscape plantings were designed and installed at the east and west ends of the park, and also along the curving staircase, midway along the southern edge of the park.



In April 2015, Friends targeted the 49507! neighborhood in its annual Arbor Day Tree Planting event. In cooperation with the Garfield Park Neighborhoods Association, the City, and a 49507! grant, 118 volunteers planted 85 trees along Burton Street to replace those lost to road construction. By working with property owners prior to planting, trees were planted according to owners’ wishes and with mulch, gator bags and a watering plan to increase the success of tree growth.







In the 1930s, South became the crown jewel of Grand Rapids Public Schools, turning out exceptional graduates and counting Gerald Ford among its alumni. Boasting an excellent faculty, a diverse student body and successful athletic teams, South was “it,” recalled the Grand Rapids Public Library children’s specialist known as “Miss Janice” to thousands of young library patrons. “Growing up as children, that was the school you wanted to go to,” she added.

By the 1960s, Grand Rapids was tightly segregated residentially, with most of GR’s African-American population falling into the South High district. According to 1968 newspaper accounts, Superintendent Jay L. Pylman and the board hoped that closing South as a high school and busing its students, 58 percent of whom were African-American, to the city’s remaining high schools would foster a new era of integration. While the merit of this decision — which closed the only truly integrated high school in the city at the time — has been debated for decades, its effects are pretty clear.

Grand Rapids Magazine (September 2003)

South Field, a 9-acre plot at the corner of Madison and Cottage Grove, was most famous for being the home field of South High. It was used by the school until its close, and in earlier days by the Grand Rapids Chicks, a local professional women’s baseball team. As the

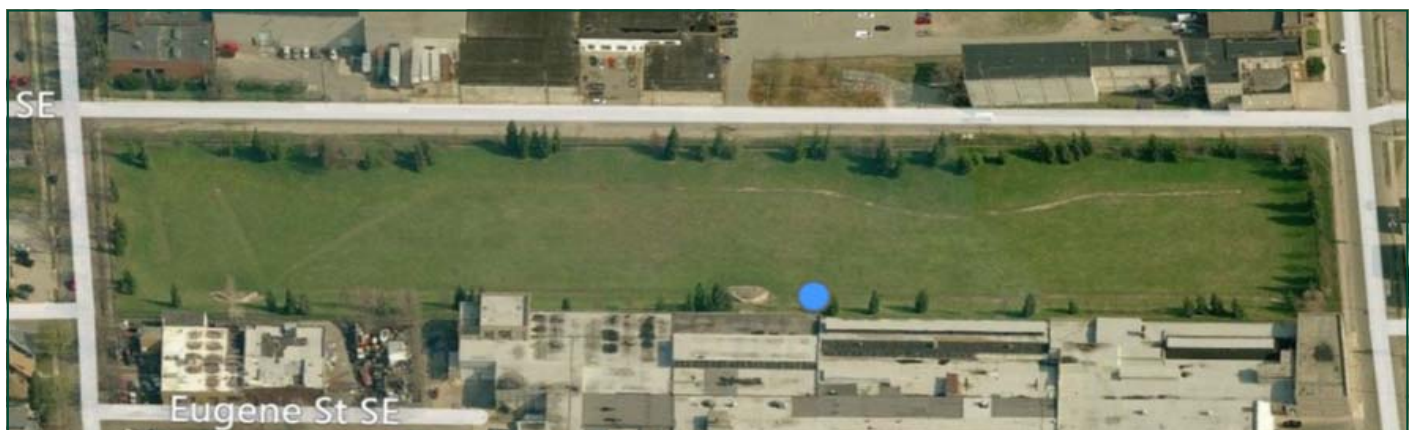
surrounding area became more industrial due to an active rail line and Silver Creek drainage, recreational use declined. It is now owned by a private party and maintained by the Kent County Drain Commission for stormwater overflow.

In a neighborhood identified as the epicenter of park deficiency and severely underserved in access to greenspace, the field is visible to all, but fenced off and unavailable to the public. Based on a 2006 community vision, the 49507! project was successful in raising \$500,000 to purchase the site for return to public use. Ultimately, the owner declined to sell at a previously identified price, and funds raised were re-programmed by donors toward other neighborhood investment.

Community interest in acquiring South Field continues today, in the belief that public space is essential to strengthen the health of neighborhood children and their families, to spark economic activity, and to rebuild the historic sense of community pride among neighbors.

#### Community Partner Highlight:

The 49507! project also worked extensively with Grand Valley State University to assist in the development of a long-term relationship between the school and 49507!-area neighbors. Led by Ruth Stegeman, Assistant Dean and Director for Community Engagement, GVSU departments of Geography, Economics, Sociology, and History agreed to direct students to various aspects of the urban dynamics evident in the city’s southeast side. Several reports were generated by students working individually and in groups, with the most in-depth information addressing the financial impact of neighborhood improvements on surrounding census tracts.



South Field Aerial View

## 49507! By the Numbers

1	Target Market Analysis completed and widely distributed
2	GRPS schools offering STOP IT! Youth Leadership Academy
5	Homes weatherized
5	Down payment assistance purchases
10	Weeks in STOP IT! Academy violence prevention curriculum
13	Families enrolled in Get The Lead Out
14	Homes purchased, rehabbed and sold/MLS listed for sale
31	Students completing STOP IT! Youth Leadership Academy
48	Homeowners receiving exterior improvements
53	Households with Family-Centered Health Action Plans
61	Families enrolled in Healthy Homes for Kids
66	Homes with kids access asthma & pest management services
85	Trees planted
176	Friends of GR Parks volunteer planters
177	Students learning Fair Housing at Seidman Boys & Girls Club
255	Residents and workers engaged in 49507! planning
1,008	Daffodil bulbs planted at Dickinson Park
1,730	Doors personally canvassed by Healthy Homes
2,514	Average dollar cost per exterior improvement
52,928	Average subsidy to purchase, rehab and resale homes
120,679	Total dollars invested in critical exterior repairs
383,840	Dollars leveraged for neighborhood investment by 49507!
741,000	Total cost of purchase, rehab & resale properties

## The overall impact of the Center's 49507!

work is impossible to measure in the short period of time allowed. However, communication with residents, workers and partners make the positive nature of that impact clear. The infusion of nearly \$1.5 million into physical assets of housing and environment, with support for health, education and economy, has created momentum for progress. The neighborhood features affordable housing, space for innovative re-development and a young population in improving schools. Looking ahead, the 49507! strategy of investing in local partners and strengthening existing assets will add long term value to resident capacity for active involvement in the community's future.

## 49507! Advisory Committee Members:

Tim Reimink\*  
Committee Co-Chair  
Crowe Horwath

Suzanne Schulz\*  
Committee Co-Chair  
City of Grand Rapids

Laurie Craft  
Grand Rapids Community Foundation

Dan Koorndyk\*  
Kent County Board of Commissioners

Senita Lenear  
Grand Rapids City Commission

Dan Otten  
Grand Rapids Association of Realtors

Ryan VanderMeer\*  
Urban Pharm Property Management

Elizabeth Welch  
Welch Law

## \*FHCWM Board Members

Nancy Haynes, Executive Director

Lee Nelson Weber, Project Coordinator

## 49507! Expenses

