

Lawrence rebirth envisioned

◆ A Lawrence group is hoping to rejuvenate the city using lessons learned from the British.

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Lawrence is not really any different than Oldham, Rochdale, Tameside or even Saltaire.

They are all communities in the United Kingdom.

And that, said Robin Henshaw, a Briton visiting the city recently, is very good news for Lawrence.

Mr. Henshaw is an expert in reclaiming the decay left behind by the Industrial Revolution. Back in

Britain he has directed dozens of projects that have resulted in a blossoming of new parks and open spaces among the crumbling legacy left behind when the great 19th-century mills fell silent.

In his home communities of Oldham, Rochdale and Tameside, outside Manchester in northwest Great Britain, the landscape is dotted with the same vacant lots, contaminated factory sites and treeless playgrounds found in Lawrence. Mr. Henshaw and his group, Groundwork UK, are transforming areas of urban blight across the United Kingdom at a rate of more than 200 a year.

A growing group of people in Lawrence is convinced the same techniques used by Groundwork

UK will work here and has launched Groundwork Lawrence. The local group is working with the British organization to adopt its practices.

It may seem an unlikely combination, said Mr. Henshaw, but the similarities between Lawrence and the decaying mill cities in his country are striking.

"There are so many parallels," said Mr. Henshaw, 49, executive director of the Rochdale, Oldham and Tameside branch of Groundwork UK.

Saltaire, for example, is a planned community in Yorkshire, with carefully laid out housing and parks, similar to Lawrence. Oldham was once the biggest cotton thread man-

See **GROUNDWORK**, Page 12

Groundwork: Sees hope

Continued from Page 11

ufacturing city in the world. Like Lawrence it is surrounded by smaller communities and is crisscrossed by river valleys. The industrial city is home to large numbers of recently arrived immigrants from Pakistan and Bangladesh, seeking unskilled jobs in the old mill cities.

Groundwork started with a staff of four. Today it employs 100 people, from landscape workers to environmental planners at 43 member organizations, and has raised more than \$80 million. It is active in 150 communities across the country. It is moving into Europe and Japan along with several American cities. Lawrence and Bridgeport, Conn., are the pioneers. Somerville, Yonkers, Providence, R.I. and Concord, N.H., are also interested in Groundwork.

The British group originally focused on protecting open space on the suburban fringes but soon set its sights on rescuing decaying urban lots. The Groundwork approach is designed to spur alliances between residents, businesses and government to improve the physical environment, Mr. Henshaw said. It takes a firm apolitical stand. Its mission is to bring about physical results by helping to jump start reclamation projects, putting together the money, overseeing design and construction and enlisting volunteers.

In Lawrence, Groundwork Lawrence has launched several projects. Headed by Maryanne Paley and hosted by the Merrimack River Watershed Council, the group is on the verge of creating its first visible results.

Groundwork is about to hire a landscape contractor for its staff and is organizing volunteers to help. Some of its projects include:

Developing a riverfront park off Island Street: With the blessings of the Hamblet family, which owns Ferrous Technology Inc. at 30 Island St., Groundwork Lawrence is creating a design for an adjacent riverfront park on several vacant acres. The land includes a sandy beach and several historic features. Plans call for an art event on the site in June to dramatize its potential and acquaint city residents with the area.

Helping to create a park out of a vacant lot: Groundwork is working with the Lawrence Planning and Neighborhood Development Corp. and the North Common Neighborhood Association to redevelop a 9,000-square-foot corner lot on Summer Street. Children in the neighborhood will soon be asked to come up with ideas. Children have already planted daffodil bulbs to kick off the project.

Expanding the Immaculate Community Garden: Groundwork has joined with Lawrence Methuen Community Coalition, Merrimack College Urban Resource Institute and the Lawrence Earth Day Committee to expand the Immaculate Community Garden. Groundwork hopes to build a plant nursery, build seating and walking paths and install flower boxes.

Starting a garden and walkway on the West Island: Working with West Island businesses, Groundwork is overseeing an effort to create a path and linear garden behind Family Service Inc. and the Greater Lawrence Education Collaborative and connect Pemberton Park to the Great Stone Dam.

More information on Groundwork Lawrence is available by contacting Maryanne Paley at the Merrimack River Watershed Council offices at 181 Canal St.
