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Richland plans 'grand finale' with Monticello Road lighting project

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Richland County is wrapping up a long-term, \$3 million effort to boost an impoverished Monticello Road neighborhood by doing its first street beautification work.

A project begins later this month to install 78 decorative streetlights between Eau Claire High School and I-20 in an area where there are no lights now. The county also is improving sidewalks along the mile-long stretch of Monticello Road, tearing down a house to create a high-profile green space, creating three crosswalks with textured brick and putting in a bus shelter.

The \$500,000 project will take about six months, said Jocelyn Jennings-Nelson, the county's community development coordinator. The city is chipping in \$71,000 to complete a block that falls within the city limits.

"We anticipate that this is going to look like a brand-new area once this work is complete," said Angela Bishop-Hammond, president of the Ridgewood/Barony Neighborhood Association. "It will look just like the city of Columbia, going down Main Street."

Change has come "bit by bit" to the Ridgewood neighborhood, as Bishop-Hammond noted.

The county targeted the 145-home community in 2005, once it became eligible for federal Community Development Block Grants to eliminate blight and stabilize low-income neighborhoods.

Ridgewood attracted focus because it was a high-crime area with homes in poor condition, said Richland Councilman Paul Livingston. Sixty-nine percent of households are low- to moderate-income.

"The biggest problem was crime," Livingston said, "and you have very little now."

All told, the county spent more than \$3 million putting in a sewage system along five streets; paving a dirt road now named Julius Dixon Lane; and building, repairing and demolishing dozens of homes.



Eau Claire Community Council Executive Director Henry Hopkins, 80, listens during a community meeting unveiling the plans for Richland County's first streetscaping project in the Ridgewood neighborhood.

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Ridgewood neighborhood residents Celeste Blakeney and Deborah Greene listens during a community meeting unveiling the plans for Richland County's first streetscaping project in the neighborhood .

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It also concentrated on illegal dumping, which was a big problem.

“Thousands of tons of garbage” were hauled off, Jennings-Nelson said. “Residents would literally see trucks coming in at night.”

Jennings-Nelson considers the street-improvement project to be the county’s “crescendo, the finale project” in the neighborhood, though the Richland County Recreation Commission does expect to build a new community center at Ridgewood Park “in the next year or two,” said assistant director Kenya Bryant.

Jennings-Nelson said there was so much work to do just to clean up the neighborhood, the county did not address economic development.

Still, street improvements are meant to be a catalyst for businesses along the corridor, from Summit Avenue to Knightner Street.

The county will cover the electric bills for the new street lights, Jennings-Nelson said.

“We are hoping in five to 10 years, there will be some economic growth on Monticello Road, that the businesses themselves will be in a position to take over the cost of lighting,” she said.

She noted there’s “quite a bit of room for improvement” along that stretch, which she considers a “gateway” to Columbia from I-20.

Resident Mildred Johnson said she’s hoping the improvements will encourage businesses to spruce up. She ticked off the location of abandoned, boarded and under-used buildings, saying, “Something needs to happen.”

Lamark Johnson, who runs a store with a grill where he makes homestyle hamburgers, said he’s teaming up with Benedict College’s community development foundation to improve his property. Come February or March, he plans to paint and put a new roof on his store.

The county’s efforts to improve the Monticello Road corridor are going to help, Johnson said.

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Following a community meeting Ridgewood neighborhood residents Grasanne Samuels, left, and Angela Bishop look at Richland County's plans to streetscape their neighborhood.

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The Ridgewood Barony neighborhood, off of Monticello Rd., will be getting a face lift due to the city's investment in its beautification.

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