

It's flower power for city streets

◆ **Neighborhood pride:** Businesses, organizations and even families are being asked to landscape and maintain green space.

By **JOHN WHITSON**
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MANCHESTER — With the city finally blanketed in the season's first heavy snowfall, Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce officials will focus this week on ... spring flow-ers.

The chamber on Wednesday will unveil a program to clean up and beautify common areas throughout the city that are now untended eyesores and magnets for trash.

"Walkable Neighborhoods" is an expansion of Intown Manchester's decade-long effort on Elm Street.

Mike Skelton, director of economic development and advocacy at the Chamber, said the effort will start with a modest goal and concentrate on areas branching off Elm Street.

"I would be very, very happy if we had a dozen sites adopted in the first year, but I wouldn't be surprised if we exceed that," he said.

Aldermen last week aired ongoing concerns over abandoned and neglected buildings, but Skelton said the chamber program will focus on areas that city residents and visitors should all be able to enjoy.

"We're not talking about physical buildings, we're talking about neglected green space," said Skelton.

The idea is simple: businesses, organizations, even families will be encouraged to make commitments to clean, landscape and maintain large and small common areas identified by the chamber.

The hoped-for fallout is more complex: that Walkable Neighborhoods produces not just fresh grass and flower barrels, but a citizenry less likely to toss empty soda bottles into their midst.

At Wednesday's breakfast, Southern New Hampshire University professor Yoel Camayd-Freixas will outline the "broken windows" theory of urban planning.

The theory holds minor signs of neglect in a neighborhood are gateways to more serious crime, i.e. vandalism and graffiti give way to assault and robbery.

People are not likely to break the first window in a building, the theory goes, but are more inclined to further damage a building already showing decay.

"If they can beautify those (common) areas, I think it would be contagious," said Ward 10 Alderman George Smith, who has been battling litter issues along Granite Street for years.

Stephanie Lewry will testify that, if you stick with it, the program works.

Intown Manchester has maintained planters along Elm Street, from Lake Avenue to Bridge Street, for 10 years.

"People sat on them, used them for litter, pulled flowers out, but we kept them up," said Lewry, Intown's executive director. "Knock on wood, but we haven't had any problem with the planters in the past three or four years.

"Just from doing our planters in downtown," she said, "we have far less vandalism than we used to because we just keep at it."

Although they won't be announced Wednesday, Skelton said the Chamber has an initial list of properties it wants to see adopted.

One of the top priorities, he said, will be Canal Street — specifically the long median strips between blocks that often sport more empty bottles than blades of grass. Another concern is the medians in the Amoskeag Bridge area, he said.

"Those are important because they're gateways to the city," said Skelton. "You have people coming off the bridge from the highway and it's the first thing they see."

It's too early to identify participants, but Skelton said quite a few banks and other large businesses have already expressed interest in adopting land.

Because it is targeting common areas, the chamber doesn't want people independently taking on projects.

"What we're asking is for people to look around their neighborhoods, bring (sites) to the chamber and make sure they are available to be adopted," said Skelton.

People adopting land can do the cleanup and landscape work themselves or hire people to do it, just as long as there's a long-term commitment, he said.

The chamber will even have an application process to take on parcels because of the time and financial investment that will be needed.

"We want to make sure people are accountable," said Skelton.

In exchange for the work, the company or people involved will be recognized with a sign on the property.

"Besides being a rewarding experience, it really does provide a genuine marketing opportunity to businesses to show that they are reinvesting in Manchester," said Skelton. "It can make Manchester a better place to live and work ... it's really an economic development initiative."

Will Stewart, community services specialist with NeighborWorks Greater Manchester, said he's happy to hear the Chamber isn't focusing solely on downtown.

"I'm really glad to hear it's going to be expanding out to the neighborhoods," he said.

Stewart said he subscribes to the "broken windows" theory that a community projecting an image of self-worth can expect better behavior from its citizens.

"Is it going to solve every problem? No, but it's definitely a step in the right direction," said Stewart. "It sends a signal to people driving by or walking through that, hey people care about this area."

One area of the city outside Elm Street has already latched onto the idea and seen success.

Lewry said the Friends of Stark Park approached Intown Manchester about a year ago about using its Walkable Neighborhoods logo and concepts as part of its revitalization effort there.

Stark Park, known for years as a gathering place for criminal activity and illicit sex, has been largely cleaned up and last summer was named to the National Register of Historic Places.