

# Des Moines Register

## DEVELOPMENT

# Three more Des Moines neighborhoods become Invest DSM targets. Who's eligible?



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The Union Park, North of Grand and Woodland Heights neighborhoods will soon be eligible for a slew of targeted revitalization grants.

The Des Moines City Council approved a recommendation Monday by Invest DSM to adopt two new Special Investment Districts that will encompass the neighborhoods. The nonprofit helps finance home renovations, encourage businesses to make improvements and jumpstart major projects in areas that have seen neglect.

Once a neighborhood is selected, it can access Invest DSM resources for 10 years.

Invest DSM is currently finalizing plans for a mixed-use development at the site of the former Highland Apartments in Highland Park-Oak Park, another Special Investment District that is in the midst of numerous new business openings.

"Knowing that Invest DSM exists and wants to 'glow-up' our neighborhood, we're very enthusiastic about it," said Marshall James, president of the North of Grand Neighborhood Association. "Between that and the overall Ingersoll improvements going on, it's pushing the character of our neighborhood to be more friendly for families and walkers. That's what we want."

Invest DSM's original mission was to focus on middle-market neighborhoods, selecting projects based on the potential for success and the biggest return on investment. In addition to Highland Park-Oak Park, the city's pilot neighborhoods for the program, chosen in 2019, were Drake, Franklin and Columbus Park. It created Invest DSM the same year to facilitate funding.

## **Previously:** Des Moines' Union Park community center progresses

Now, in addition to North of Grand and neighboring Woodland Heights, City Planner Anuprit Minhas said, the organization is giving its attention to a "softer" area on the city's map: Union Park, where 30% of homes are in poor or very poor condition and 62%, average. No residents have taken part in Des Moines' City Block Challenge Grant — a program that helps pay for exterior home improvement projects — in which participation is usually an indicator of whether a neighborhood is ready to be a Special Investment District.

What Union Park has seen, Invest DSM Executive Director Amber Lynch said, is a wide range of engagement in other community activities, including the Porchfest festival, beginning in 2022, that invites visitors to stroll through the neighborhood and listen to musicians performing on residents' front porches.

"Willingness to participate in things that are about the community, that's something we're looking for," Lynch said. "That's what we're all about."

**More:** Amber Lynch will work to lift up four Des Moines neighborhoods as Invest DSM director

North of Grand and Woodland Heights are more predictable additions to Invest DSM's roster. Their selection reflects the success of Ingersoll as a commercial corridor, Lynch said. Just 14% of the homes there are in poor condition and 62% average. The area has also seen strong participation in the City Block Challenge.

"Ingersoll is really becoming an asset that the city can be proud of, and we want to make sure that the housing stock around it remains strong so that we can protect all of that," Lynch said.

Funds will become available after a year-long planning process. Invest DSM will first meet with residents and business owners to identify what the neighborhoods want to see improved.

## **No new dollars for Des Moines' south side**

Despite Invest DSM's success stories, one council member, Joe Gatto, expressed disappointment that the group hasn't included any of the neighborhoods in his south side Ward 4 in its newest plans. Gatto has long called for the area to see the same targeted investments being made in other areas of the city.

Columbus Park, one of the original Special Investment Districts, was in Ward 4, but transitioned into Ward 3 in the latest round of council redistricting.

Gatto asked for discussions on having a neighborhood on the south side added within the next 12 months.

"I'm hoping we look at it sooner rather than later," he said.

**More:** Pickleball, sports bar coming to Southridge Mall as planned health club's offerings expand

Lynch told the Des Moines Register that the nonprofit was only ready to take on two new investment areas. Invest DSM oversees up to 700 projects a year and is run by a staff of eight.

"On the other side of things, the southeast side of Des Moines has newer housing compared to some of the rest of the city. Easter Lake is newer construction from the last 20 years or so and doesn't need to be revitalized yet," she said. "We're focusing at the moment on early 1900s housing stock."

## **Invest DSM to maintain presence in already targeted neighborhoods**

The Franklin and Drake neighborhoods are both poised to meet the city's goals for revitalization, with Invest DSM noting high participation and already existing financial capacity. Franklin is expected to "graduate" from its Special Investment District designation ahead of schedule, although the property assessments Invest DSM uses to measure some of its success won't be updated till 2025.

Invest DSM plans to stay the course in the Columbus, Oak and Highland Park neighborhoods, where commercial projects have taken off while residential ones lag.

"We're still earning the trust of residents," Lynch told the City Council members. "It's going to take a little bit longer than in Drake and Franklin, but we need to keep going."

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