

WinnetkaTalk

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Nancy Searle, left, and Pam Strobel are part a group of Woodley Road residents in Winnetka who joined together to raise \$450,000 for a new school in the Avondale neighborhood of Chicago. (Laura Weisman/For Pioneer Press)

Woodley Road residents have and give much

<http://www.pioneerlocal.com/winnetka/news/607913,wn-woodley-101807-s1.article>

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By CHRISTOPHER PETERSON Staff Writer

It wasn't your average door-to-door fund-raiser -- not in scope, anyway.

A group of Woodley Road residents recently pooled together almost half a million dollars for a new Chicago charter school, and they did it the same way a troop of Girl Scouts peddles boxes of Thin Mint cookies.

A year ago, Pam Strobel and Nancy Searle biked among their neighbors on Woodley Road, an unincorporated two mile area of Cook County, bordered by Hibbard, Locust, Illinois and Hill Roads in Winnetka, dropping off information about their initiative to raise \$500,000.

"We wanted to do this the old fashioned way," Strobel said.

The information explained the significance of charter schools in big cities and detailed what it would take to start one.

So far, 24 families -- including Strobel and Searle -- have chipped in to total about \$450,000 in the last year. They hope to raise \$50,000 more to meet their goal.

The initiative is part of Chicago's Renaissance 2010, which aims to reorganize Chicago schools that perform poorly.

The half-million dollar goal is based on start-up costs, or "incubation funding" to supplement state money, said Phyllis Locket, head of the Renaissance School Fund.

"The idea is to create autonomous schools that have flexibility" to hire and organize, she said.

The schools are under the jurisdiction of the Chicago Public School District.

Usually, the Renaissance School Fund solicits businesses, but Strobel and Searle observed the success of a similar initiative a year ago in Kenilworth and figured it was worth a shot in Winnetka.

Residents in Kenilworth had raised more than \$580,000 to launch the Providence Englewood public school.

Strobel said she was thankful Kenilworth set a positive example, and she hopes other communities might mimic that success.

With the help of the Renaissance 2010, Strobel and Searle got to work last October writing letters a mapping out their plan.

The residents of Woodley Road were receptive. Several donated upwards of \$25,000.

"This is about us as a neighborhood coming together and doing something greater than any of us could have done individually," Searle said.

The new charter school, in Chicago's Avondale neighborhood on Chicago's Northwest Side, opened its doors this fall to more than 250 kindergarten through fourth-graders.

The school is called Irving Park, and it's operated by Chicago International Charter School. Searle praised the organization for boosting education standards in urban areas.

"They have a strong program," she said. "They know what it takes to provide a rigorous program."

R.J. McMahon, the school's director of development said this is only the second effort spear-headed by a group of neighbors, and he hopes it's not the last.

"We're very excited about that," he said. "We're very fortunate to have the Renaissance School Fund to help us identify groups like that."