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City neighborhood touts its greening at news conference

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Nilda Ruiz remembers when the grassy park in her North Philadelphia neighborhood was a dumping site, filled with old toilet bowls, flat tires, and broken glass.

"It wasn't a safe place to walk," said Ruiz, standing in the park at Ninth and Norris Streets on Wednesday for a news conference on the city's progress in becoming the greenest in the nation. "To look at it now . . ."

Ruiz, born and raised in the neighborhood, leads the community development group Asociacion Puertorriquenos en Marcha (APM). Through her agency's partnerships with the city, the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, and the Mural Arts Program, plus a \$1 million sponsorship from the Home Depot Foundation, her neighborhood is on its way to becoming the greenest in the city, she said. "And we welcome any neighborhood that wants to challenge us."

In the shadows of a SEPTA Regional Rail station, the park, with a welcoming wood fence, is also a storm-management project that allows rain to be absorbed by plants instead of the sewer system.

Throughout the neighborhood, which sprouts with lush trees and patio flower gardens, are pervious paving and other water-management systems. There are two community vegetable gardens. Students helped plant 80 trees around nearby Ferguson Elementary School.

In two weeks, on Sheridan Street, contractors will start building 13 green, affordable homes that include green vegetable roofs, solar panels, recycled materials, and sun shades. Next spring, construction will begin to convert the barren lot near the train station into a thriving retail space.

"Sustainability and the related issues are for everyone," said the director of the mayor's office of sustainability, Katherine Gajewski, "and can improve the quality of life for everyone. That's what it's about."

Ruiz agreed. She said the greening of her once-blighted neighborhood, a transformation that has taken place over seven years, had brought developers, businesses, residents, and pride.

"You feel enormously proud," she said, "and this sense of satisfaction that you are making an impact and a difference, that you're making the world a better place than you left it."

The neighborhood's strong greening efforts are why Mayor Nutter choose the park to release the first annual progress report for his Greenworks Philadelphia plan.

Nutter announced the initiative last year with 15 targets for improving the city's environment, reducing energy use, creating jobs, and enhancing the quality of life.

"But it's out in the community where the real work gets done," Nutter told the sweaty crowd, some people chewing over plates of Spanish food, others sipping ice tea and cradling potted plants from one of the table giveaways. "The results are seen out in the streets."

According to the report, the city is more than halfway to its goal of reducing greenhouse-gas emissions by 20 percent, increasing tree coverage by 30 percent, and managing storm water, and 72 percent of the way to becoming the greenest city in America by 2015.

It's tied for third with New York City in square footage of green roofs.

"In year two, you're going to see more and more of this activity," Nutter continued, "and we're going to achieve our goal."



Mayor Nutter and others tour a green space on Ninth Street near Temple University. The North Philadelphia neighborhood is on its way to becoming the greenest in the city, one resident said.