

South Side community organization working to build business and health hub

By Igor Studenkov
For Chronicle Media

In the first half of the 20th Century, the intersection of 79th and Halsted streets was a vibrant commercial district filled with stores and customers.

Today, there are still some businesses in the area, but many of the buildings have long since been torn down, and others stand abandoned.

Over at 839 W. 79th Street, a four-story building that used to house a furniture showroom has been vacant for the past 20 years. But Greater Auburn-Gresham Development Corporation, a local community organization, is hoping to turn it into the Auburn-Gresham Healthy Lifestyle Building. It will have medical services, a fitness center, a coffee shop, a performance space, community meeting rooms and spaces for local businesses. The organization hopes that this, along with some of its other initiatives, will serve as a catalyst to attract residents who would be willing to invest in the community and work toward lasting change.

As Carlos Nelson, GAGDC's executive director, explained to the Chronicle, the building was a longtime neighborhood fixture. It was built in 1926, when the Auburn-Gresham neighborhood saw a large population increase as residents from working-class neighborhoods farther south, as well as city workers and railroad construction workers, moved in

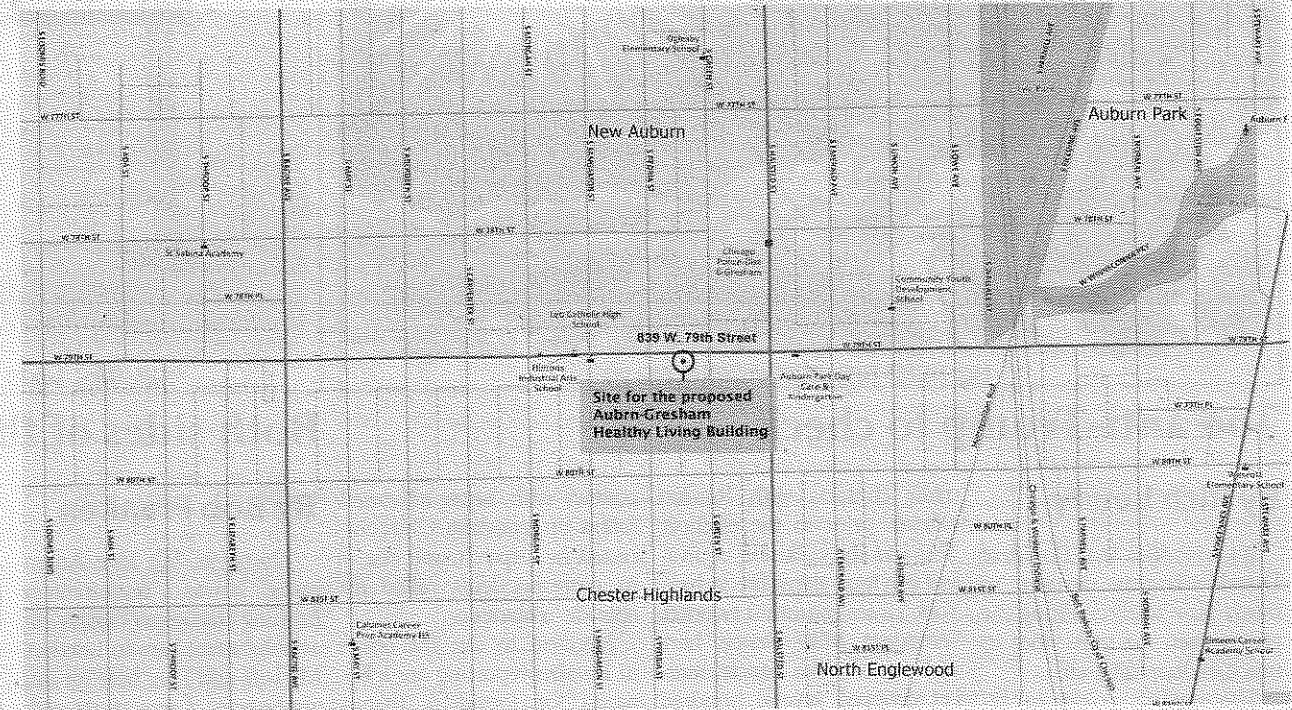
in large numbers. The store stayed open for 60 years, lasting through the mid-century demographic shifts that saw the neighborhood change from majority white to majority black.

According to the Chicago History Museum's Encyclopedia of Chicago, many of the new arrivals were middle-class federal workers and Chicago Transit Authority employees, but there were also less well-off residents who settled farther west.

Concerns about rising crime, as well as disinvestment, caused many businesses to close. And, as Nelson explained, many of the businesses that did move in were convenience stores, discount outlets, currency exchanges and liquor stores. And while he emphasized that there was nothing wrong with those businesses per se, the issue for Auburn-Gresham is these seemed to be the only kind of businesses the neighborhoods can attract.

After the furniture store closed, the State of Illinois used the building for public aid services and other social services. But that, too, closed around 20 years ago.

Today, a CVS location sits at the northwestern corner of the intersection, and a Bank of America location sits right across the street. The northeast corner has a clothing store and a phone store. There are some other businesses — such as Respect for Life, a bookstore run by the Nation of Islam — within a block of the intersection. But there is a



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vacant lot sitting at the southeastern corner, and there are a number of empty storefronts and vacant lots within blocks of the intersection.

Nelson said that the idea for the Auburn-Gresham Healthy Lifestyle Building emerged during the development of the Auburn-Gresham Quality of Life Plan. It was part of the Local Initiatives Support Corporation Chicago's New Communities Program. The program is an extension of its mission to help community organizations improve their neighborhoods, and it has LISC Chicago to team up with a local community development organization — in this case GAGDC — to develop strategies for improving the

community using input from residents, businesses, faith leaders, elected officials and community organizations. The two organizations developed two plans — one in 2005 and one in 2016.

Nelson said that there were several issues that emerged. Community stakeholders wanted to see local businesses that paid decent wages, improve access to health services and have more community gathering spaces.

Buying the building seemed like an opportunity to achieve all those goals.

"It was really a discussion about equitable distribution of resources [and] opportunities," Nelson reflected.

"And this building was symbolic of disinvestment, disrepair. It has been a four-story, 600-square-foot building that's been sitting ominously vacant for 20 years."

Making sure that the job generated pay more than a minimum wage was an important part of the vision.

"[We want to create] 100-150 living wage jobs," Nelson said in an earlier interview. "And the living wage meaning their salaries will allow them to purchase homes in the community, some of the beautiful brick bungalows and two-flats. They will be able to shop in some of new businesses and existing businesses."

By the time GAGDC start-

ed looking to buy the building, it fell into the hands of a private owner. Nelson was tight-lipped about who it was, saying only that he "wasn't looked upon very favorably in the community."

"As a community-based organization, we were able to convince the owner to sell [the building] to us, because we had a plan and we got support from elected officials [including] Ald. David Moore (17th State Sen. Jacqueline Collins (D-Chicago) and State Rep. Mary Flowers (D-Chicago)," he said.

Derris Cameron, GAGDC's Program Coordinator, added that the fact that this was a

Continued on Page 15

Business

Continued from page 14

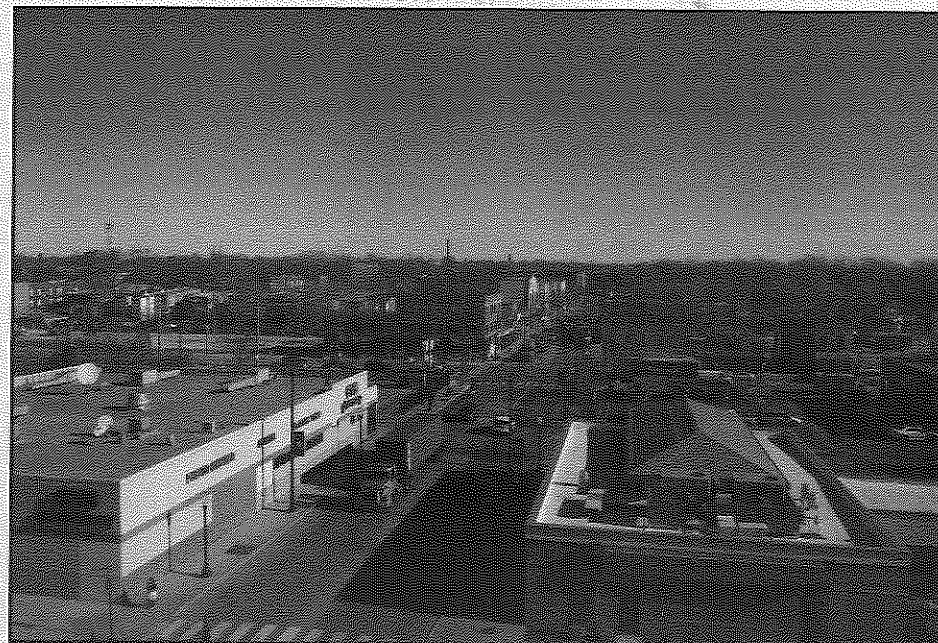
community-driven initiative played a role as well.

"It was very much a community effort to not only acquire the building but reinvigorating the corridor with much-needed economic opportunities," he said.

Nelson gave the Chronicle a tour of the building. He said that the current plans call for preserving the terra cotta facade and putting in glass in the currently bricked-up first floor windows. CAGDC would build a new elevator shaft and stairs near the main entrance, and while it's not clear what would happen to the existing elevator in the back, the stairs by the west wall — one of the few parts of the interior that survived since the building's original construction — would be removed so that windows could be added. On what is currently a completely blank wall, Nelson said that they are thinking of using the equally windowless east wall, which faces Halsted Street, to put up advertising.

The first floor would have a "higher-end" coffee shop on the east side, with a performance space in the basement. Nelson said that they have a coffee shop that has committed, but he declined to give any details safe for that it was "like a Bridgeport specialty coffee shop." A health clinic would go in on the west side of the first floor.

The second floor would have a fitness center, offices of a local security company and a "vegan nail salon." The third floor would be used for businesses, while the fourth floor would have community meeting spaces and office space for community organizations.



A view of the 79th/Halsted intersection from the rooftop of the future Auburn-Gresham Healthy Lifestyle Building. (Photo by Igor Studenkov/for Chronicle Media)

Nelson said that some of the tenants who will be on that floor include ACT Up Chicago, an aptitude test tutoring service that already works with his organization, Center for Economic Progress, an organization that offers business advice and tax preparation help for working-class individuals, Chicago Cares, a volunteer service coordinator. GAGDC will have an office on the floor as well.

As for the roof, Nelson said that his organization has been talking to Commonwealth Edison power company about a joint project that will put solar panels on the roof and use them to power not just the building itself, but some of the surrounding building. CAGDC is also considering putting up a "green roof," which would use plants on the roof to reduce heat and absorb some of the water that would otherwise need to be drained away after it rains.

Nelson said that as of Nov. 29 they had enough tenants to fill the first two floors and about half of the third. They

hope to have enough tenants to at least fill the rest of the floor before the construction starts.

When looking for businesses and organizations, they want someone who would be committed to hiring locally — in Auburn-Gresham and some of the nearby South Side neighborhoods — and paying a living wage.

"We will have locally owned business in the building, but we're open to progressive type businesses and organizations," Nelson said. "If you're a business that thrives on walk-in traffic and butts in seats, that is definitely a place to be."

Cameron said that technology companies and non-profits are welcome.

While most of the funding has been secured, Nelson said that CAGDC still needs \$2 million to begin renovations. The organization has been talking to local and national foundations, and it's been actively looking for corporate sponsors.

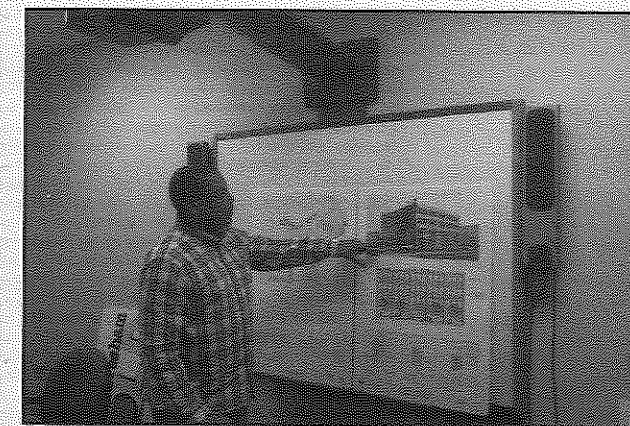
The project's page on



Carlos Nelson, executive director of Greater Auburn-Gresham Development Corporation, stands on the roof of the future Auburn-Gresham Healthy Lifestyle Building. (Photo by Igor Studenkov/for Chronicle Media)

CAGDC's website (at <http://www.gagdc.org/839-Redevelopment.html>) has the information about donation and sponsorship opportunities.

Nelson said that, once they have the funds, they expect the renovations to take about



Carlos Nelson shows up Greater Auburn-Gresham Development Corporation's plans for Auburn-Gresham Healthy Lifestyle Building. (Photo by Igor Studenkov/for Chronicle Media)



The first floor of the future Auburn-Gresham Healthy Lifestyle Building, which still has cubicles left over from its time as a State of Illinois public aid facility, will be home to a coffee shop and a health center. (Photo by Igor Studenkov/for Chronicle Media)

nine months.

As previously reported by the Chronicle, Auburn-Gresham Healthy Lifestyle Building is just one part of the organization's strategy to revitalize 79th Street commercial corridor. CAGDC has been pushing for a new Metra station on the Rock Island District Line, four blocks east of it. It's also working to beautify the streetscape and help local businesses.

As Nelson saw it, Auburn-Gresham Healthy Lifestyle Building alone wouldn't revitalize the area, but it was an important piece of the puzzle.

"It's important to see this

building as giving home, giving opportunity, bringing life into the area," he said. "The fact that it's a [local] community organization that's doing this project makes it a more exciting venture [because] it's not being led by an outside force."

Cameron said that the potential for change is there — it just needs businesses and organizations who believe in it.

"Giving our community entrepreneurs space, a way to reconnect at the Auburn-Gresham community — this is Auburn-Gresham community doing it for Auburn-Gresham," he said. "[It is] giving back to itself"