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 once a CC's location. It was built in 1928, when the Greater 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 large numbers. The store was 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 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 remain were convenience stores, discount outlets, 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 northeastern corner of the intersection, and a Bank of America location sits right across the street. The northeastern corner has a clothing store and a place to store.

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 local neighborhoods, and it has UIC 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 plants — one in 2005 and one in 2006. Nelson said that there were several issues that emerged. Community stakeholders wanted to see local businesses to provide job opportunities 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, disparity. It has been a four-story 6,000-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 means 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 the new businesses and existing businesses."

Continued on Page 15
Business
Continued from page 14

community-driven initiative played a role as well.

"It was very much a community effort in not only acquire the building but reimagining 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. The ist floor 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 to the basement. Nelson said that they have a coffee shop that has committed, but he declined to give any details as 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.

Nelson said that some of the tenants who will be on that floor include ACT Up Chicago, an autism-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, Chica Go Cares, a volunteer service coordinator. CAGDC will have an office on the floor as well.

As for the roof, Nelson said that its 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 buildings. 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 local-owned businesses 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 bumps in seats, that is definitely a place to be."

Cameron said that technology companies and nonprofits are welcome.

While most of the funding has been secured, Nelson said that CAGDC still needs $12 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 CAGDC's website (at http://www.gagdc.org/835-Redevelopment.html) has the information sheet donation and sponsorship opportunity.

Nelson said that, even if they have the funds, they expect the renovations to take about nine months.

As previously reported by the Chronicle, Auburn-Gresham Healthy Lifestyle Building, stands on the roof of the future Auburn-Gresham Healthy Lifestyle Building. (Photo by Igor Studenikin for Chronicle Media)

Carson Nelson, executive director of Greater Auburn-Gresham Development Corporation, stands on the rooftop of the future Auburn Gresham Healthy Lifestyle Building. (Photo by Igor Studenikin for Chronicle Media)

"We're excited to have an important piece of the puzzle," Nelson said. "As we're giving homes, giving opportunity, bringing life into the area," he said. "The fact that'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's giving back to itself"