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Metropolitan Church gains landmark status

by Georgia Geis

The sweat and tears of a few Bronzeville residents saved the Metropolitan Apostolic Community Church building, 4100 S. King Dr., from extinction. Those residents who formed the Save the Met Coalition in 2001 can rest easier knowing the City Council last month designated the 117-year-old Romanesque-styled church building a landmark.

"This is the story of the ladies who saved the church," said Jonathan Fine of Preservation Chicago about the small group of preservationist parishioners who led the fight and whose average age was 70.

Linda Slaughter spearheaded the effort when she heard the Rev. Leon Perry's plan to demolish the church where her father, the Rev. Theodore Richardson, was the pastor for 46 years, to replace it with a modern complex.

"All my family history is with this



The Metropolitan Apostolic Church is now officially designated a Chicago landmark. Outlook file photo

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High school a possibility for Pershing West?

by Nykeya Woods

Chicago Public Schools recently announced the proposed addition of a high school to its elementary classes at John J. Pershing West Magnet School, 3200 S. Calumet Ave., and is drawing some fire from the community over the move.

"This really hit the whole neighborhood as a bomb shell," Art Moore told the Outlook. "Basically they had [a] meeting to say 'this is what we're doing; this is how we did it.' And as far as the community's feelings, this is a done deal."

Moore and his wife Sevela live across street from the school, which used to be Douglas Elementary School. The couple has lived in the neighborhood for more than 20 years

and think that there will be an oversaturation of high schools enrolling teens who do not live in the area.

CPS spokesman Malon Edwards denied Moore's charge, saying far from being a done deal, the proposal is part of a routine, internal process.

"Our Office of New Schools sends out a [request for proposals] annually, requesting schools in certain communities for the most part [that] are targeted as having a need," Edwards said. "The community could have a lot of overcrowding. It could be deemed to not have high quality education options. There are various reasons."

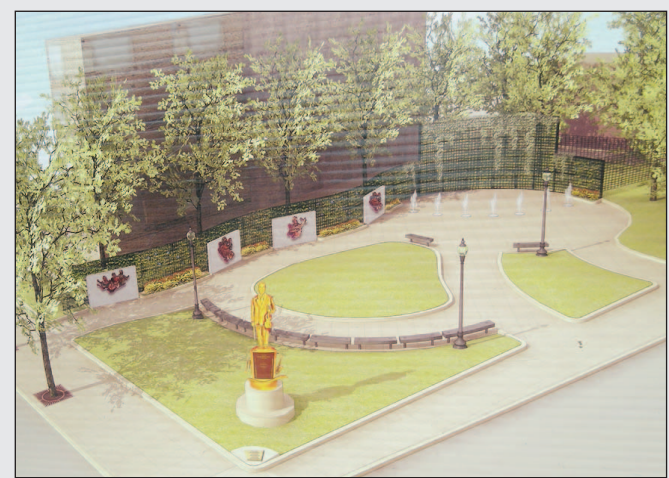
Longtime Bronzeville business owner Jim O'Neal agreed with Moore.

"It seems like the Chicago Public School system is attempting to ramrod our community with a fifth high school...It's unwanted by the community," O'Neal said. "What they're proposing at Pershing West is not serving the immediate community. They should be opening the school up to the community."

Currently, there are three Bronzeville public high schools within a mile of each other — Dunbar Vocational Career Academy, 3000 S. King Dr., Bronzeville Military Academy, 3519 S. Giles Ave. and Wendell Phillips Academy, 244 E. Pershing Rd. De La Salle Institute, 3455 S. Wabash Ave., is a nearby private school and Young

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Ald. Dowell scraps park plan



A rendering of a park once planned for 47th Street and King Drive. Outlook photo

by Yvette Presberry

What was originally intended to be a Bronzeville park giving homage to music history may soon become the site of a retail development, yet another sign of changing political leadership in Bronzeville.

Ald. Pat Dowell (3rd) said she wants a site once designated as park space at 47th Street and King Drive to instead be used for retail.

"My intention is to put that corner out in order to make it a retail site," Dowell said of her plan to issue a request for proposals (RFP) for the location, formerly named Dyett Park. An RFP is an invitation for developers to provide a specific redevelopment proposal.

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church," said Slaughter. "I was mad as hell. We have lost too many Black history sites in Chicago."

The Rev. Leon Finney, who now leads the congregation at the church, joined forces with the Save the Met Coalition to take legal action against Perry via a long-standing restraining order.

"I wasn't thinking about doing much beyond calling attention to the historical significance of this over-100-year-old church," said Finney, who is planning a community-wide celebration this winter.

"Immediately, it was apparent I had to provide heft on the legal side."

Finney and the coalition soon garnered the support of many residents in the Bronzeville community, as well as preservation advocacy organizations like the then-newly formed Preservation Chicago.

"The Met was one of our first projects and it was on our first most endangered list. We didn't know what its fate would be," said Fine.

As the church sat empty, vulnerable to vandalism and the elements, from December 2001 until Finney was able to purchase the building in October 2003, the fight to save the church raged on. Immediately upon Finney's purchase of the property, the coalition drafted applications to bestow landmark designation on the church.

"This is the end of a long journey and

the beginning of another journey," said Finney of the church becoming a recognized historic landmark.

Rosella Smith, who got married, baptized her two daughters, and eulogized her husband in the church, said it was an important step to get landmark status so nothing like this would happen again.

"When I first saw it, I broke down and cried," said Smith about seeing the church in October 2003 after Finney purchased it. "It looked as if a bomb had hit it."

That year, the church became the Metropolitan Apostolic Community Church, with many members of the church's prior congregation joining with Finney's own congregation. Within six

weeks of acquiring the historic church, the first service was held, and they have been worshipping there continuously ever since.

"We did a quick fix. This church has to be restored," said Smith.

Smith said she hopes the landmark status will help the coalition get grants to fund the extensive restoration that is needed.

As an outgrowth of the Save the Met Coalition, Slaughter founded the organization The Greening of Bronzeville, which will focus on landscape beautification in the area, as well as raising awareness regarding environmental issues. The organization's first project will be landscaping the grounds in front of the church, Slaughter said.

Pershing

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Women's Leadership Charter School, 2641 S. Calumet Ave., is also within close proximity.

Moore questions why CPS closed Douglas in 2005, then reopened it as Pershing West, serving only fourth- through eighth-graders, while its sister school, Pershing East Magnet School, instructs kindergarten through third grade students. Pershing East educates roughly 200 students a year, according to CPS' Web site. It is housed in a pair of trailers at 3113 S. Rhodes Ave.

"This is a grammar school....If there's a question of not enough students over here [at Pershing West], we're all for bringing those elementary school students [at Pershing East] here," Moore said.

O'Neal, who, along with his wife E. Dawn Griffin, owns Griffin Funeral Home, 3232 S. King Dr., said that the Chicago Police Department patrols the area during the school year, but some teens from Dunbar using the major thoroughfare at King Drive are still destructive.

O'Neal said that people from outside the area are making major decisions about Bronzeville's schools and that only two people from the community were part of the Pershing West transitional advisory council (TAC), the group who announced the new high school at an August 7 meeting.

Edwards said that the TAC will go over the RFPs and "pretty much decide whether or not these proposals fit the community." If the TAC and the Comprehension Evaluation Team like the proposal, it is then passed along to Arne Duncan. If Duncan approves, he passes it along to the Board of Education to be voted on, Edwards said.

park

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Dowell said she thinks there will be a lot of interest from business leaders and developers to use the property at 47th Street and King Drive for commercial purposes. It is on the corner of one of Bronzeville's main retail strips and its anchoring boulevard and is accessible to public transportation.

"I didn't hear anybody ask for a park," Dowell said, adding that the public should have some input into what to do with the land.

One of the ward's chronically stalled projects, Dyett Park was supported by former alderman Dorothy Tillman, Dowell's predecessor. Denver-based sculptor Ed Dwight was paid about \$600,000 to create granite panels for the park displaying various forms of music and musicians. Dwight was also supposed to create a statue of the late Capt. Walter Dyett, former musical director of Phillips High School, 244 E. Pershing Rd., and DuSable High School, 4934

S. Wabash Ave. Dyett taught several people in the 1930s and '40s who later became famous in the music industry, including singer Nat King Cole and television producer Don Cornelius.

It is evident, though, by the height of weeds and accumulation of debris in the fenced property that construction has been delayed for a long time. Billboards stand in front of the property with a rendering of what the park would have looked like if it had been developed.

Dowell said that the panels in the park could be moved to other parts of Bronzeville, and the Dyett statue moved to DuSable High School, where the late musical director and violinist taught. "Capt. Dyett should be celebrated at [DuSable]," Dowell said.

The closest public parks to the proposed Dyett Park are Taylor Park, 4800 S. State St., Houston Playground, 5021 S. Cottage Grove Ave., and Washington Park, 5531 S. King Dr.

"We don't need another haven for people hanging out, littering and possible drug [selling]," Dowell said.

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