

Roosevelt plan a beginning Other projects may follow redevelopment

BYLINE: Shannon Joyce Neal sjneal@DaytonDailyNews.com

DATE: January 16, 2005

PUBLICATION: Dayton Daily News (OH)

SECTION: Business

PAGE: D1

DAYTON — Community activist Annie Bonaparte has long known the role the former Roosevelt High School should play in her West Dayton neighborhood. The 330,000-square-foot brick school building at 2013 W. Third St. saw its last students in 1975, and housed Dayton Public School administrators until a year ago. Last month, the Dayton school board approved a measure to allow local developers Karrington-Wilkinson to move forward with a plan to redevelop the building.

A restored Roosevelt, filled with educational and training programs for local residents, housing units for seniors, and space for needed business and social services would serve as an anchor for a community long neglected by private developers.

"It's important to the rest of the community," Bonaparte said. "It's an example of what can happen."

Bonaparte said she's confident Karrington-Wilkinson's partners, Mark Parks and Dan Wilkinson, the former Dunbar High School football standout and Detroit Lions defensive tackle, will share her vision and desire for change.

"I want them to understand that the quality of life must be better here," Bonaparte said.

Parks and Wilkinson joined Bonaparte on her mission to redevelop Roosevelt when Bonaparte pulled Parks aside after he gave a speech at an event for the Black Chamber of Commerce. Parks ran a construction company in Kentucky, and liked the idea of working on a project in his hometown of Dayton. A mutual friend connected him with Wilkinson, who had been working on development projects on the East Coast and in other parts of Ohio.

Wilkinson, too, saw redeveloping Roosevelt as a chance for him to use his development skills locally.

"People understand how important (Roosevelt) is," Wilkinson said. "If it had been torn down, that would have been another blight in the community."

Karrington-Wilkinson's initial plan for the site would turn the former high school into apartments for seniors and leave more than 60,000 square feet of space for commercial and community uses.

Parks said potential tenants include a police station for the Third District, a doctor's office, and space for programs through the YMCA and Sinclair Community College. Dayton Public Schools plans to build a school on the site for kindergarten through eighth grade. The building's amenities, such as its two pools, two gyms, the auditorium and cafeteria, would be open for community and school use.

Parks said financing for the \$25 million project has not been finalized, but they hope to use some public money such as tax credits for senior housing. They want to use Roosevelt as a model for similar projects in other cities as school districts look for ways to redevelop outdated buildings.

Parks said the building is structurally sound, but has aged enough that turning it back into a school would have been difficult. The school district had originally planned to demolish the building.

Roosevelt was built in 1922 and was considered a model for school construction. Converting the classrooms into apartments won't require much demolition, Parks said, and they hope to leave features like chalkboards, cabinets and science lab counters intact.

Construction on the project won't begin for more than a year, Parks said, and they are still looking for tenants to fill the non-residential space in the building. The first phase of the redevelopment is scheduled to be finished in 2008.

Bonaparte said she wants the plan to include even more social services and training programs and more aggressively go after some of the neighborhood's most serious problems.

After more than a decade of working to improve the community, Bonaparte and a group of community activists formed the Ujima Neighborhood Network in 1992 to focus their efforts. Ujima, the Swahili word for collective work and responsibility, is the guiding principle for the third day of the Kwanzaa celebration.

The group works on a simple principle, Bonaparte said, to find out the needs of the community and work with developers, business owners and social service groups to meet those needs. University of Dayton volunteers and neighborhood residents conduct a yearly survey to find out what those needs are.

When residents said they wanted a pharmacy, the group worked to get a Rite Aid into the neighborhood, Bonaparte said. When people said they needed Laundromat, they got a local businessman to include one as part of another development.

"We know exactly what we need," Bonaparte said. "There isn't one business (we recruited) that isn't making money."

She wants the plan for Roosevelt expanded to address more of those needs, such as job training and small-business programs, services to help residents struggling with drug problems and a place for young people to gather and find support.

"I love Mark, and I love Dan, but the thing is, these young men have never worked with anyone like me before," Bonaparte said. "I respect their knowledge."

Wilkinson said he knows there is an opportunity present in those needs, and has wanted to take on a development project in West Dayton for years.

"In the Dayton community, so much is needed," Wilkinson said, "but there is so much to gain."

The Wright-Dunbar neighborhood captured his interest years ago, but potential projects never panned out. Instead, Wilkinson built up his development career away from his hometown. He always planned to return to Dayton once he had the right opportunity and continue with his real estate career once his football career ended.

"I've always thought about a life after football," he said in a phone interview from Detroit.

He began more than seven years ago fixing up old houses and selling them for a profit. He slowly expanded the scope of his projects, taking on work in Columbus, Florida and Northern Virginia. Now, his company is one of five working on a \$2 billion mixed-use project in suburban Maryland.

During the football season, Wilkinson worked remotely much of the time and traveled to Dayton when he had breaks in his schedule.

Wilkinson said he has tried to explain to younger players the value of starting their post-football career while they're still playing.

"Some of them aren't as fortunate to play as long as me," Wilkinson said. "It's going to happen to us all, it's just a matter of time."

Wilkinson and Parks said Roosevelt's redevelopment could extend beyond the borders of the neighborhood. Senior housing could provide needed customers for business development in Wright-Dunbar, and Roosevelt's social services could serve Wright-Dunbar residents. He said they know the project and its potential benefits are bigger than the neighborhood itself.

Bonaparte said she still has trouble convincing people of the project's value and its potential to change the community. That won't stop her, but she also won't wait too long for people to change their minds.

"I know what the end will be," Bonaparte said. "They don't get it. If you don't help one another, it will always be bad."

Contact Shannon Joyce Neal at 225-2436.

Dan Wilkinson

JAN UNDERWOOD/DAYTON DAILY NEWS THE OLD ROOSEVELT HIGH SCHOOL building on West Third Street in Dayton will be restored and filled with educational, training programs for local residents, housing units for seniors, and space for business.