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PHOTO BY TIM DUGGAN

Solving the Cayce Place Conundrum

Change is coming, and education remains key to breaking the cycle of poverty

By Theresa Laurence

Every time Cayce Place resident Darlene Thompson returns home from visiting friends or running errands in other parts of the city and makes that right turn off Shelby Avenue into the vast network of Cayce Place, the same thought always goes through her head: "Here we go, back in the 'hood again.'"

While East Nashville's decade-long renaissance has transformed much of the neighborhood and helped create a strong sense of community among neighbors, Cayce Place has remained out of the equation. With a massive overhaul of Cayce Place now in the works,

residents like Thompson are beginning to see what "the 'hood" might look like when it is re-imagined for the 21st century.

Initial plans for the James A. Cayce Homes call for demolishing the 716 outdated barracks-style brick units and building a higher density, mixed-income neighborhood in its place. The idea is to create a new gateway to the East Side, reconnect the street grid that now encompasses Cayce and integrate that area back into the thriving East Nashville community.

Right now, "we do feel very isolated," says Cayce Place resident Vernell McHenry. "If we

had a more beautiful, more up-to-date place, we would feel more integrated. We would feel better to have a good-looking place to come home to."

Both Thompson and McHenry are active members of Cayce United, a group of Cayce residents who have joined together to voice their neighborhood's concerns about the need for affordable housing, good jobs and access to social services.

When community groups and the Metro Development and Housing Agency first started the conversation about Cayce redevelopment over a year ago, many Cayce residents were skeptical. Would they be displaced to other, unfamiliar neighborhoods? Would they be able to afford rent in the new Cayce? Would their concerns be heard? As residents have gotten more involved with the process, they are feeling more confident. "I think it's a good idea," McHenry says of plans so far. "I hope everything will work out."

The plan to mix low-income subsidized housing with market-rate, working-class housing is not an entirely new idea for Nashville, but it has never been envisioned on this large a scale before. "MDHA is blazing a new path here," says Edgefield resident Randall Gilbert, president of the Cayce Place Revitalization Foundation. With a membership consisting mainly of East Nashvillians, the Cayce Place Foundation is an advocate for a holistic approach to this redevelopment.

Everything from the plan to replace subsidized units one-for-one to the high level of public discourse is different this time around, Gilbert says. "They have never gone through this type of public engagement process before."

MDHA held a series of public meetings

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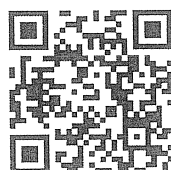


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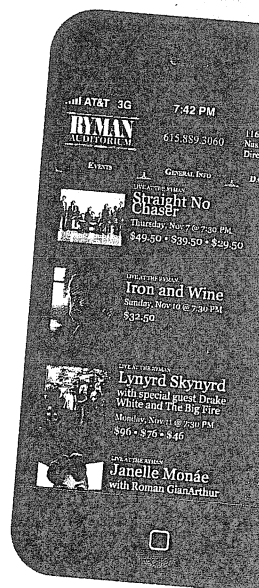
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during the spring and summer, and MDHA leaders have also met privately with Cayce residents and community groups. "We have no intent here but to get as much feedback as possible," says MDHA spokeswoman Holly McCall. "It doesn't behoove us to create a plan without input from residents."

The prospect of new, modern housing is appealing, but Cayce residents know that if true transformation is going to come, plans must go beyond new architectural designs. "At the end of the day we need some jobs in the community," says Cayce United member Marilyn Greer.

Demolition and construction at Cayce Place won't likely begin before 2015, but when the time comes, Cayce United members want contractors to tap into the willing and able resident workforce. "We know that they will bring in a big company, but there should be room in there somewhere to give employment to residents," says Greer.

Employment is a key issue for Cayce residents as unemployment in East Nashville is 15 percent above the Davidson County average. Thirty-six percent of Cayce residents are currently working low-wage jobs and want the opportunity for better employment; many of the adults living at Cayce are on disability and unable to work; around 20 percent of the residents are simply unemployed.

Employee background checks present a significant problem for Cayce residents and others living in poverty that have criminal records. Today, Thompson describes herself as a "God-fearing woman," but she has been unable to escape the bad choices of her past. Her criminal record still pops up whenever a potential employer runs a background check on her; she is then politely dismissed. "Those of us who have made bad choices in life and realize the choices deserve a second chance," she says.

"We want good jobs for Cayce residents to help them get up and out of poverty," says Matt Leber, a local community organizer who is assisting Cayce United's efforts.

The two community groups with a keen interest in the redevelopment of Cayce Place, Cayce United and the Cayce Place Revitalization Foundation are working together, but each has a distinct makeup and focus. Cayce United is primarily made up of housing project residents most concerned with meeting the immediate needs of residents; they also serve as liaisons between MDHA and all residents, especially the elderly and disabled who may be unable to attend community meetings. The Cayce Place Revitalization Foundation consists mostly of East Nashville community members and is taking a broader look at how a holistic approach to mixed-income redevelopment will work here.

Fresh off a trip to New Orleans for a public housing conference and a tour of the new Columbia Parc neighborhood there, Gilbert

and Cayce Place Revitalization Foundation vice president Bob Borzak were abuzz with the possibilities for Nashville. Seeing the crumbling, Katrina-ravaged former St. Bernard Public Housing Development transformed into a shiny new mixed-use, mixed-income community, Borzak says this model "just makes economic sense."

This model has worked in other cities, Gilbert says, because "what attracts market rate buyers is the same thing that can pull poor folks out of poverty. They need the same thing."

And what they need — the key thing — is good schools.

"Young families moving into the neighborhood don't want to leave when their kids start school," says Borzak. Families living in public housing like Cayce, as well as in the wider neighborhood, want strong public schools where their children can get a good education, he adds.

A resident of East Nashville for nearly 30 years, Borzak witnessed firsthand how concerned parents joined together to transform Lockeland Design Center into one of the highest-performing schools in the district. "Parents were the key, without a doubt," he says.

Gilbert and Borzak think the same transformation can take place at Warner and Kirkpatrick elementary schools and Bailey Middle School, but it will be a steep climb. "One in three Cayce kids are performing at grade level in elementary school and by the time they reach Bailey Middle it's just one in seven. That has to change," says Gilbert.

What's needed, he says, are dedicated teachers and a strong principal who has autonomy. "The decision-making for that school needs to be made within the walls of that school," Gilbert says. That's what worked at Lockeland, Borzak says, and it could be replicated.

It's taken a while in the course of the Cayce planning process, but "we've finally kick started the conversation about education," Borzak says. They've been in contact with Metro Nashville Public Schools director Jesse Register and gotten support from Cayce United members about the need for better public educational opportunities in East Nashville.

"You can build pretty houses and all that, but until these kids get a better education, they're going to remain trapped in poverty," says Gilbert. It is estimated that a high school dropout will earn \$200,000 less than a high school graduate over a lifetime, and almost a million dollars less than a college graduate. Also, in the United States, high school dropouts commit about 75 percent of crimes. If neighborhood schools can do a better job of educating students, ultimately, "we reduce spending on the legal system and incarceration costs," Borzak says.

"The cost of doing nothing here is too high," Borzak says. If the education piece of the Cayce Place revitalization plan does not come to fruition, true change will remain unrealized, he says.

Most residents of Cayce have only been

exposed to “a small sliver of the economic pie,” Gilberd says. In the new mixed-use development scenario, a third generation Cayce resident could wind up living next door to a college graduate for the first time in his or her life. “That starts them thinking about possibilities” they may have never considered before, Gilberd says.

“I think we can learn from each other,” says Cayce United’s McHenry.

While excitement is high, most everything about the future of Cayce Place remains in flux right now. MDHA spokeswoman McCall notes that “it’s still really premature” to consider any part of the plan a done deal yet.

Earlier this year, MDHA hired EJP Consulting Group to make recommendations about site and funding plans for the Cayce project, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that MDHA has to follow all the plans, McCall says. MDHA plans to have a new executive director in place by the end of the year, which could steer things in a different direction as well.

Additionally, no funding measures have been secured, and “we can’t do this without federal funding,” McCall says.

Throughout the process, Borzak’s mindset has been “let’s get the plan out there and worry about the money end of it later.”

Local and state dollars will be part of the funding plan for the new Cayce, and federal funding would come through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. HUD has “wholeheartedly embraced the holistic approach to neighborhood transformation,” Gilberd says, and has provided grant funding to other similar projects across the country. “The secret is out that concentrated poverty doesn’t work, and the secret is out that this holistic approach is what works,” he says, and “the HUD Choice Neighborhood grant program is only available for holistic redevelopments.

“HUD’s Choice Neighborhood grant program is much different than the Hope VI program,” Gilberd says.

In recent years, MDHA completed Hope VI renovation projects at four area properties: John Henry Hale, Sam Levy, and Preston Taylor Homes and Vine Hill Apartments.

“There were some issues with the Hope VI program,” McCall says, including complaints of displacement among residents. This time around, it will be different, she assured. MDHA has committed to rebuilding an equal number of public housing units and allowing all Cayce residents in compliance with their lease to remain at Cayce if they choose.

The idea of moving into temporary housing is daunting, McHenry says, because “we don’t have the income to do all this juggling around.” It would also be physically exhausting for the disabled, like herself, and the elderly.

“We want zero displacement and zero homelessness,” says Leber. “If people want to move out of Cayce (during construction) we want it to

be by choice and not by force.”

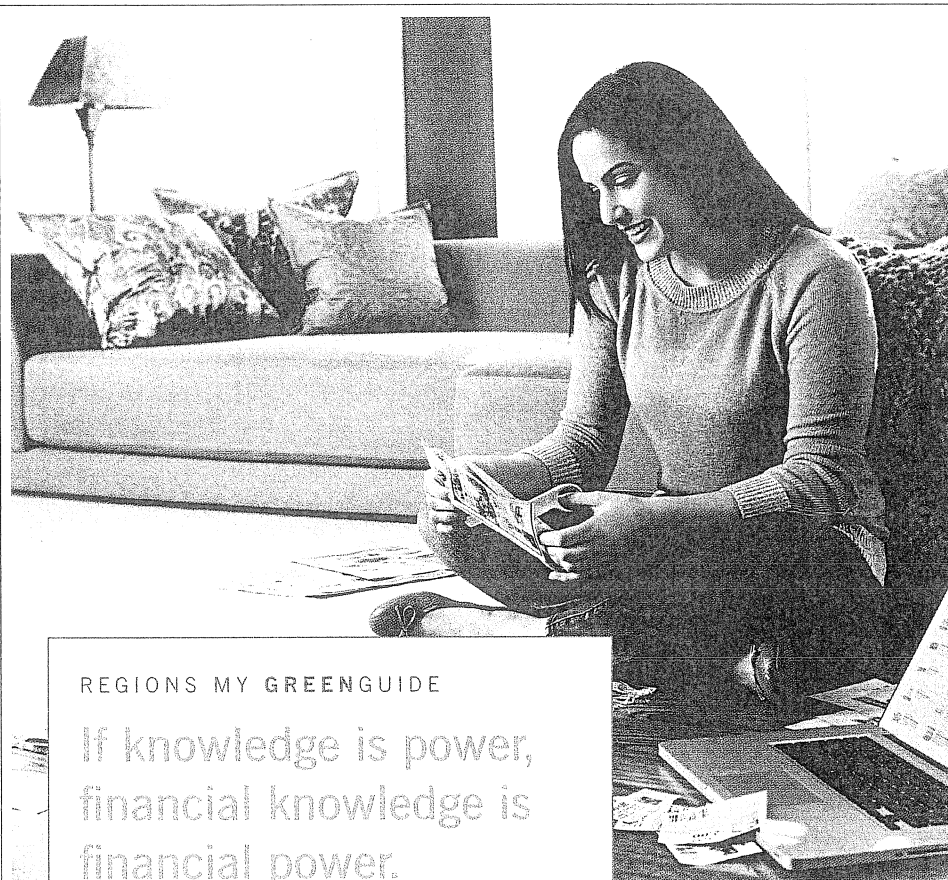
In order to keep residents from being displaced, new construction could begin on current green space such as Kirkpatrick Park, and residents would move directly from their old unit into a newly built one. New green spaces would be re-configured in smaller chunks throughout the new development. “It would be a rolling process,” McCall says. “Hopefully we will not have to move anybody out of the neighborhood.”

With broad-based support for something major to happen at Cayce, members of Cayce

United and the Cayce Place Revitalization Foundation are optimistic that plans are moving in the right direction. “We just want to make sure they do what they say they’re going to do,” McHenry says.

“It’s an amazing opportunity for a lot of people,” Borzak says. “I see nothing but good things coming.”

Visit theeastnashvillian.com for useful links to more information concerning the Cayce Place redevelopment project.



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