

Renovation begins on new community center

BY JEFFREY PIERRE - JPIERRE@MIAMIHERALD.COM

02/13/2015 7:34 PM | Updated: 02/13/2015 7:34 PM



First step: Community leaders on Wednesday break ground for the new community center in Overtown at the site of the historic Ebenezer Methodist Church. The former church will be transformed into a three-level, multipurpose hub. ROBERTO KOLTUN / EL NUEVO HERALD

Overtown's historic Ebenezer United Methodist Church building will serve the community in a new way after a 12-month renovation to convert it into a community center.

The project, which will be called the Overtown Community Center, will transform the former church into a three-level, multipurpose hub that includes a state-of-the-art kitchen, office space, and a banquet and reception hall.

On Wednesday, residents and community leaders met at the site of the old church for a

groundbreaking ceremony.

“[The Ebenezer Methodist Church building] is not in slum or blight conditions,” said Clarence E. Woods III, the executive director of the Southeast Overtown/Park West Community Redevelopment Agency. “But it will be repurposed.”

The basement level will house a kitchen and cooking space, the second “main level” will serve as the banquet hall and will also serve as a multipurpose “flex space” and the third level will contain office space for People United to Lead the Struggle for Equality (P.U.L.S.E), a local grassroots nonprofit that advocates fair treatment.

Led by Woods and CRA board chairman and Miami City Commissioner Keon Hardemon, the CRA will contribute \$2.1 million toward the project, along with a \$900,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce and Economic Development Administration.

The new space will also be shared with Miami Dade College’s Hospitality and Culinary Institute, which provides free skill training to community residents as part of a partnership with the CRA.

Shelly Smithfano, the executive director of MDC’s hospitality institute, says “there’s a need” for skilled workers trained in the field of hospitality, especially with the completion of the Miami Worldcenter and the 1,800 room Marriott Marquis in the city’s future.

“There are more jobs than there are people to fill them,” Smithfano said. The Worldcenter’s Marriott Marquis, she says, will need up to 800 housekeepers along with other hotel staff once the project is complete. “People need to know that there are jobs available. Getting prepared and trained is important so they can get those jobs.”

Woods says the new Overtown Community Center “represents the opportunity to build up the person.”

The center will invite local business owners to use the kitchen as a free resource to help Overtown’s entrepreneurs expand and grow their businesses.

“We have Ms. Moore’s Bakery, for example, if she wanted to do a large order – something she can’t do in her house – she will be able to come in and utilize the kitchen,” Woods said. “It will be a shared space for entrepreneurs as well as the training facility.”

Hardemon, who recently came under fire for his role in the Worldcenter negotiation, says the new community center is one of many steps the CRA has taken to improve the neighborhood and standards.

“One of the things that we can do as a CRA is improve the living conditions of the people that reside here,” Hardemon said.

Still, he says, there are areas like crime and drug use that are difficult for the CRA to tackle.

Those “issues of morality,” according to Hardemon, are the product of a long history of neglect from government officials. But rather than focus on that history and reason behind the creation of CRAs, he says the neighborhood needs to find alternate ways to bring money into the community.

“The money coming in [through the CRA] is not infinite, it’s finite; and it only grows when we have development,” he said.