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Making Tough Streets A Little Friendlier

Bethel New Life transforms Chicago’s west side

By Keith Schneider
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CHICAGO — A church-based community development corporation on Chicago’s west side is using a recently modernized rail transit line as the backbone of an ambitious retail and single family home development plan that it hopes will transform some of this city’s toughest streets.

One of the two pillars in Bethel New Life’s development plan is Parkside Estates, an urban enclave of handsome two-story, three-bedroom, one-and-a-half-bath, single-family houses on North Hamlin Boulevard in the West Garfield Park neighborhood. They are two blocks from a busy shopping district on West Madison Street, one block from the elevated Lake-Pulaski rail station on Chicago’s Green Line and across the street from Garfield Park. Both the neighborhood elementary and middle schools are within a 10-minute walk.

The other pillar is a planned $4 million, 23,000-square-foot Transit Center that is to include shops and restaurants on the first floor, a day care center and employment office on the second floor and a walkway that connects the building to the Lake-Pulaski station. The Transit Center, which is to produce some of its own energy with photovoltaic generators, was designed by Chicago architects Doug Farr and Kevin Pierce.

The retail space is being marketed by James Matanky, whose firm, Matanky Realty Group, specializes in selling space in new and renovated inner city buildings and is also a joint venture partner with Bethel New Life in the Transit Center.

Demolition of the existing store on the site is to start in mid-March, with construction scheduled to begin in early May. The bulk of the financing for the Transit Center project is to come from $3.5 million in city, state and federal grants. The balance — $500,000 — comes from a construction loan and from Bethel New Life.

Together, Chicago city planners say, Parkside Estates and the Transit Center are proving that some of the same promising demographic and economic trends that are strengthening the Loop, Chicago’s central business and retail district, are also helping to revive low-income and minority neighborhoods.

"We’ve seen quite a renaissance downtown, and what we’ve been trying to do is push development west and repopulate neighborhoods like West Garfield Park," said Brenda McKenzie, Chicago’s deputy commissioner of planning and development. "Parkside Estates does that and so will the Transit Center. The main thing in the urban development game is know-how and persistence. Bethel New Life and Mary Nelson, the director, have that."

Founded in 1979 as the nonprofit social service arm of Bethel Lutheran Church, a prominent house of worship and a civic institution since it was founded in 1897, Bethel New Life has specialized in redeveloping existing inner-city properties. Bethel New Life has renovated more than 1,000 apartments for the poor and elderly in West Garfield Park and transformed the shuttered St. Anne’s Hospital and its 9.2-acre campus into a center of housing, job training, health care, and performing arts.

Those projects and several smaller ones, Bethel New Life says, have generated more than $100 million in economic activity in West Garfield Park, which is finally recovering from a series of race riots in the 1960’s. The riots accelerated white flight to the suburbs and left the community with 23,000 residents — 60 percent below its peak population — and worrisome rates of drug abuse, crime, and unemployment.

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what Ms. Nelson calls a “bold and audacious” plan that Bethel has set in motion to improve the quality of life in the entire West

Garfield Park neighborhood. That plan includes 100 more single-family homes in two other neighborhood developments that

Just as crucial as its success in helping low-income residents become homeowners is the role that Parkside Estates is playing in

When completed, the 50-home development will have a total cost of $6.25 million. Home sales are financing most of the cost,

In addition, buyers are eligible for “location efficient” mortgages, a two-year-old mortgage instrument backed by Fannie Mae, the

The catalyst for Bethel’s development plan, which urban specialists say is one of the most ambitious transit-oriented
developments of any low-income urban neighborhood in the nation, was the Chicago Transit Authority. In 1992 the transit

agency announced that because of declining ridership it wanted to close the entire Green Line.

Ms. Nelson joined a group of community leaders to call on the transit authority to modernize the line instead. Ms. Nelson argued

that in a neighborhood where a third of the families don’t have cars, the El station is a vital transportation link. Bethel New Life
also asserted that just as the Lake-Pulaski station generated economic and civic activity throughout most of the 20th century,

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Bethel formed the Lake Street El Coalition. In July 1993, the transit authority withdrew its demolition plan and introduced a new
$300 million capital project to rebuild the Green Line, which was completed in 1996. Annual ridership on the line, which was 3.9
million in 1993, has increased about 10 percent a year since construction was completed and was 6.2 million last year.

"Chicago neighborhoods grew up and developed around the transit lines," said Sharon Feigon, manager of research and
development at the Center for Neighborhood Technology, a Chicago-based non profit urban policy organization that helped to
revive the Green Line. “There are a lot of neighborhoods in this city where that relationship has stayed strong and is going really
well. And there are others, like West Garfield Park, where access to a transit line is helping to revive the neighborhood.”

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was published by the New York Times on March 3, 2002. Reach Mr. Schneider at keith@mlui.org. For more of the Institute's first rate journalism about transportation, sprawl, agriculture, and economics, see www.mlui.org.