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CHA museum moving forward

Facility to be built in Jane Addams Home building

By Sara Olkon Chicago Tribune reporter

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More than a decade after a grandmother from the Near West Side suggested that a public housing museum would be the perfect way to preserve a slice of Chicago history, the idea finally is going forward.

On Wednesday, the Chicago Housing Authority's Board of Commissioners gave a preliminary nod to donating a vacant building it owns for the museum.

"I want people to know that good things came out of public housing," said Deverra Beverly, 74, who has lived in public housing her entire life. "There [were] good people."

The National Public Housing Museum would be built in a 70-year-old, vacant building at 1322-24 W. Taylor St., the last remaining building from the Depression-era Jane Addams Homes. The museum's Board of Directors hope it will open in 2012.

CHA Commissioner Michael Ivers applauded the effort and said he hopes the museum couteracts the image of public housing residents as the "dregs of society."

Its founders are modeling the museum after the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, a popular Manhattan attraction that tells the stories of immigrant families with guided tours of the tiny walk-up apartments.

Similarly, visitors to the public housing version will step inside re-created period apartments to learn what life was like for families from the 1930s to the present. Officials said interactive and multimedia displays will allow residents to tell their personal stories. Organizers are asking current and former public housing residents to share artifacts and personal stories via www.publichousingmuseum.org.

"We want this to be a place that does many things—honors and remembers some of the forgotten lives and tries to understand a story of resiliency," said Susanne Schnell, museum project director.

When the proposal first received public attention in 2004, some housing advocates questioned the expense and argued that the building should be preserved for housing. But critics were absent at Wednesday's CHA meeting.

Sunny Fischer, board member and executive director of the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation, a financial backer of the project, said the issue was "not an 'either/or'"—art and culture also are important. The nonprofit is working to raise \$17 million—\$5 million in federal funding and much of the rest from corporate, philanthropic and individual donations.

Crystal Palmer, vice president of the museum's board of directors and a public housing resident leader at Westhaven Park, said the museum would tell the personal stories behind CHA's \$1.6 billion Plan for Transformation, a controversial vision that is replacing high-rises with mixed-income developments and private-market vouchers. In the process, thousands of public housing residents have been displaced.

Beverly, who has been a leader on her tenant council for years, first proposed the idea to the CHA. A founding member of the museum's board, Beverly sounded optimistic as she left the meeting.

"We knew they were getting rid of everything," she said, referring to CHA's demolition plan. "This will preserve our stories."

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