

Berkeley's First Teen Center Planned for Downtown

By Riya Bhattacharjee



2109 Martin Luther King Jr. Way as it currently exists.



The proposed YMCA teen center

Berkeley teenagers may finally have a solution to their boredom.

Soon they may have a new place to hang out after school, get help with homework, meet up with friends or simply have some fun.

A building that formerly housed a PG&E service center at 2109 Martin Luther King Jr. Way is all set to become the Teen AMP (Aspirations Made Possible), Berkeley's first center dedicated entirely to teenagers.

While some youngsters are calling it their legacy, others are simply happy to have a place they can make their own.

The city's Zoning Adjustments Board recently approved the Berkeley-Albany YMCA's plans to renovate the building into a place to nurture and mentor 13- to 18-year-olds.

The project proposal adds a third floor to the building, which will house the YMCA's administrative offices, and a roof garden overlooking Memorial Park. Solar panels will generate electricity, and the building will be naturally ventilated.

The renovated building will have a new stucco finish, and the

aluminum sunscreens on its storefront will be decorated with the sandblasted words "vision," "growth" and "voice."

A new three-story stairwell will have a glass facade opening onto Martin Luther King Jr. Way. Its concrete stairway walls will project a mural that will remain lit at night.

Instead of paying \$130,000 in rent for office space at its current 2070 Allston Way location, YMCA will be paying the same amount to the teen center to help sustain it.

The zoning board waived three existing parking spots and five new parking spots mandated by the construction of a third floor.

The Y plans to start constructing the \$5.2 million facility this fall with help from a group of teenagers, officially known as the Teen Task Force.

YMCA officials decided to form the task force in fall 2007, when PG&E gifted the building to the Berkeley-Albany YMCA. The 8,000-square-foot building is PG&E's largest corporate contribution to date. The building is valued at \$2.1 million, according to a PG&E press release.

Since then, the task force of

eight teenagers - including students from Berkeley High School and Berkeley Technology Academy, the city's only public continuation school - have been involved in a lot of fundraising, planning, writing formal reports and requests, budgeting, public networking and the selection and hiring of architects and consultants.

They have been attending the city's zoning board, landmarks commission and design review committee meetings, lobbying board members to approve the new design.

At the June 4 Landmarks Preservation Commission meeting, Vice Chair Gary Parson said he hoped the center would serve as a beacon to the city's teenagers and that more young people would end up there instead of the public safety building across the street.

Currently, the YMCA has to host teen programs such as Y-Scholars, the Outsiders Club and YMCA Youth and Government in a 400-square-foot space downtown, across from the post office.

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The YMCA hopes to expand these programs and attract teenagers from all economic and social backgrounds—including homeless teens—and help them with college preparation and internship opportunities, among other things.

The center will also host social events for teenagers in the evenings. YMCA officials said there will always be enough security to control crowds.

“The project brings me back to a whole different time in my life, when a project like this would have meant so much to myself and others in the community,” Berkeley-Albany YMCA CFO Angelo Gallego told zoning board members. “This is a place where meaningful dialogue will take place. It’s not as much of a playground as it is a place where social interaction can take place [among] the teens and their mentors and the adults in the community to really make Berkeley a better place to live in.”

John Tidwell, a B-Tech student who serves on the Teen Task Force, praised the location of the new center.

“Downtown Berkeley is a place where teenagers from all walks

of life go,” he said at the zoning meeting. “The teen center will not be for one group of teenagers. It will be for all groups of teenagers. Sadly, a lot of negative things take place in downtown Berkeley, but the teen center will give students a positive place to go to.”

Julie Sinai, chief of staff to Mayor Tom Bates, told the Daily Planet that the mayor’s office hopes to work with the YMCA to bring homeless youth to the new teen center. Sinai said the city had not built a dedicated teen center in the past because of a shortage of resources.

Berkeley currently has teen programs spread across several community centers in the city.

Berkeley-Albany YMCA President Fran Gallati said that the new center was something for which the community had been waiting a long time.

“Back in 1991, there was a public outcry that Berkeley didn’t have a teen center,” he said. “This is really a watershed moment in Berkeley. This community needs a teen center more than ever now.”