

THE BERKELEY VOICE

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YMCA Teen Center to be Built in Berkeley

■ The 13,000 square foot building in downtown location is a gift from PG&E

By Doug Oakley

The Berkeley-Albany YMCA will begin construction of a \$5.2 million teen center this fall to help area youth with academics, careers and community service.

The 13,000 square foot building at the corner of Martin Luther King Jr. Way and Center Street in downtown Berkeley was a gift to the YMCA from PG&E in 2007.

The organization already raised \$3 million for the project which it hopes to complete by September of next year. And in a bold move that YMCA CEO Fran Gallati admits has not been "pain free," the organization placed 12 highly motivated teenagers in charge of the entire process, from design to selecting the architects and construction company.

"We've been able to give these kids unbelievable project experience," Gallati said last week during an open house to show off the building. "It hasn't been pain free, but it's been a good experiential process for these kids and we've had a lot of good adults guiding them." The kids get paid \$8 an hour and if they stay on for a year they get an additional \$1,200 educational award.

Alex Aszklar, 15, who was giving tours of the empty building last week, said she's been on the task force for two months.

"My grandfather is a member of the Y and he encouraged me to get on the task force," Aszklar said.

"I thought the idea for a teen center was really cool, so I



Doug Oakley/Staff

A FEW of the members of the Berkeley-Albany YMCA Teen Task Force were on hand at a community meeting June 24 to show off what will be a new teen center in downtown Berkeley following a year of construction that starts this fall. From left, are Alex Aszklar, Viviana Zubieta, Dasha Wesley and John Tidwell.

got involved." During her time on the task force she said she learned that "not everyone is going to like your ideas, so you just have to keep going and coming up with new ones." Aszklar said she envisions the teen center as a calm place to get help with school work or finding a job.

The YMCA hopes to add a third floor to the building, pending city approval, with a rooftop deck. Part of the building will house the group's business offices, which are currently on Allston Way, saving about \$130,000 a year on rent, said Tracy Hanna, director of programs and development.

The center will help teens get tutoring, prepare for a career and offer opportunities for community service, Hanna said. It will feature a lounge, a technology center with computers, meeting space and space for once-a-month activities like art exhibit openings or poetry slams.

A representative for the construction company that will build the center said it will have solar panels on the roof and feature lots of windows for natural light.