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Holly Center Sold to Urban Land Conservancy

By Arthur Rosenblum

I'm ecstatic," declared Michele Wheeler, President of the Northeast Park Hill Coalition, when asked about the sale of the ruins of the once thriving Holly Shopping Center that covers the area from 33rd to 35th Aves. and Hudson to Holly Streets. "It's the beginning of a new era."

It's been almost a year since arsonists burned down the center as a part of gang conflict that has dominated this part of Park Hill for decades and which has confounded neighbors and city officials for at least that long. How to rid this area of drug dealers and return it to the centerpiece of a proud community has challenged several mayors, city council representatives and many hundreds of neighbors who avoid the streets at night, feel like prisoners in their homes and fear for their friends, family and neighbors.

Serving the Community

On Wednesday, April 8 the Urban Land Conservancy (ULC) took over ownership of the Holly Center from Michael Bullock, culminating several months of negotiations that often appeared to be failing.

The Urban Land Conservancy is a Denver-based nonprofit organization that purchases and redevelops urban properties and makes them available for community service organizations. They have a short but impressive list of projects that includes the Phillips Center at 35th Ave. and Franklin St., which houses an early education center and nonprofit organization serving at-risk youth; the Habitat for Humanity Outlet Center in the Baker neighborhood; transitional

housing for people who are homeless run by the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless at 40th Ave. and Colorado Blvd.; the Tennyson Center for Children at Colorado Christian Home in west Denver; a future mixed-use development with affordable housing at 20th St. and Glenarm Pl.; and others. Descriptions of these projects can be found at www.urbanlandc.org.

According to Aaron Miripol, the ULC President and CEO, demolition of the Holly should be completed within a couple of months. Miripol is not yet prepared to commit to what projects will be located at the center. He told a joint meeting of the boards of Greater Park Hill Community, Inc. and the Northeast Park Hill Coalition that the economy is slowing down all development and the community will not see new construction take place for another year or more.

Miripol said that he is in discussions with Envision Leadership Prep and other charter schools about possible location at the Holly. Envision is the middle/high school that will be located in the Smiley Middle School building beginning this fall.

In describing a future school at the Holly, Miripol emphasized that any building that houses a school will be designed for much more than the school. "The building has to have other community benefits," he said, "the design will serve other public uses for the building." Miripol doesn't know what other partnerships might work at the location, but they will be developed over time.

In the short-term, Miripol said that environmental remediation will not be very demanding, and that he hopes to discuss the development of a community garden with Denver Urban Gardens.

Miripol emphasized that the property on the north side of the center, owned by the Hope Center, and the restaurant on Holly St., will remain. For months there was concern about the status of the lease with the Family Dollar that had been located at the Holly, but ULC arrived at terms with the store's parent company to terminate the lease. Miripol also was concerned about the possible location of a liquor store across from the Holly, but the withdrawal of that application made it possible for ULC to go ahead with the purchase and plan for a school.

Michele Wheeler expressed the feelings of many neighbors when she tempered her excitement, saying, "There's still plenty of work to be done." Much if not all of that work is finding a way to include the buildings on the south side of 33rd Ave. between Hudson and Holly Streets and directly across the street from the Pauline Robinson Library in the area's redevelopment. Neighbors continue to be concerned about the condition of the bar and storefronts in that strip and the magnet they provide for undesirable activity.

Miripol is hopeful that progress can be made, but stressed that the ULC is not interested in additional purchases of property in the area. Cameron Bertron, an official with the Denver Urban Renewal Authority (DURA), has been in conversations with the owners of those properties and the garage adjacent to the Holly, but he stressed that conversations are not negotiations, that he is attempting to keep the door open for prospects for redevelopment.

As the purchase of the Dahlia Center by Oakwood Homes raised hopes and then concerns when the economy declined, the purchase of the Holly also raises hopes and concerns as the center continues to lie dormant.

Aaron Miripol is aware of the risks the ULC has taken, but pointed out that the purpose of the ULC is to have a presence in areas that have been challenged and that he is hopeful the ULC presence at the Holly will enhance the community. “The library, the Hope Center, the recreation center, and the post office are all community assets that we hope to enhance,” Miripol said.

During all the years that Denver’s and Colorado’s economy boomed, the Holly remained stagnant. Now that the national and local economies are struggling the likelihood of that blighted center becoming a community asset is as Michele Wheeler knows, the stuff that ecstasy is made of.