

THE DAILY RECORD

Real Estate

\$22.5M for renovation of landmark American Brewery

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January 2, 2008 6:56 PM

The owners of the American Brewery complex in East Baltimore have secured \$22.5 million to renovate two buildings, totaling 113,000 square feet, in one of the city's most blighted neighborhoods.

Humanim, a Columbia-based nonprofit that provides work force development for the disabled, purchased the property for \$2,500 from the city in November, and plans to move its 250 employees there in the first quarter of 2009, when renovations are slated to conclude.

Henry E. Posko Jr., CEO of Humanim, said Wednesday that many of the organization's 4,500 beneficiaries already live in East Baltimore, and that he has high hopes for the neighborhood.

"We've been fortunate that we've hit it at the right time," he said. "There's lots of development going on along North Avenue, lots of development to the south, all these little pockets of human capital. ... People think that this is an area that has fallen on hard times, but there are a lot of resources here."

The American Brewery, which was built in 1887 by John Frederick Wiessner, is located at 1700 N. Gay St. in the neighborhood known as Broadway East. It is recognizable for its bright red brick exterior and Asian-influenced central tower.

C. William Struever, CEO of Struever Bros. Eccles & Rouse, the brewery site's general contractor, called it "the most magnificent historical building in the state of Maryland."

The brewery is surrounded by hundreds of boarded-up properties, and there were five shooting homicides in the area in 2007.

About eight city blocks to the south lies East Baltimore Development Inc., an 88-acre, \$1.8 billion urban revitalization district near the Johns Hopkins Hospital.

Broadway East faces many of the same problems of drug-dealing and violence that once plagued the area to the south, according to Struever.

"If you want a symbol of the city's challenges and distress, the American Brewery neighborhood is right up there," he said.

Desa Sealy Ruffin, president of Gotham Development, the site's developer, said that the brewery's proximity to EBDI is a huge advantage.

"We see this neighborhood as the northern anchor for the redevelopment occurring a few blocks to the south," she said. "Any time you have \$25 million pouring into a community that has as many problems as this one, it's a good thing."

Eric Booker, President of the Washington-Wolfe Gateway Community Association and a lifelong resident of Broadway East, said the community is in dire need of affordable housing and a supermarket, and that Humanim's redevelopment of the American Brewery will provide the spark that will lead to more investment in the neighborhood.

"I can say that on behalf of the community that we are all excited that the building is being renovated after being vacant for so long," he said.

The neighborhood surrounding the brewery is also home to several large black Christian congregations, including Israel Baptist and Southern Baptist.

M.J. "Jay" Brodie, president of the Baltimore Development Corp., said the brewery's proximity to the churches and the EBDI will be a "potent combination" to spur the revitalization of the neighborhood.

"The two of them together are going to be the real sign of stability and the future of the area," he said. "With the exception of the church, there are no signs of investment... This is the beginning of the reversal."

At a Dec. 19 Board of Estimates meeting, the city approved two \$350,000 deferred loans, which Brodie described as "basically grants" — one from the BDC and another from Baltimore Housing — for site improvements on the brewery.

According to Humanim officials, the owners have also been approved for \$14 million in state and federal historic building tax credits, but they still need \$2.6 million to complete the project.

Christopher A. Eddings, The Daily Record's publisher, is chairman of Humanim's board of directors.



Cindy Plavier Truitt (left), chief development officer for Humanim, Henry E. Posko Jr. (center), CEO of Humanim, and Desa Sealy Ruffin, president of Gotham Development, stand in front of the American Brewery building.

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