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Philadelphia Tribune (1912-2001); Aug 11, 1992;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Philadelphia Tribune (1912-2001)
pg. 4B

Freedom Square: Boon or burden?

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Tribune staff

When construction of the Freedom Square Retail Center is completed, many Germantown residents expect more than a new mall. They hope the shopping center will bring jobs, lead to the revitalization of area houses and streets, bring increased police security to the area, and decrease recent drug activity.

However, others said they see a less bright future for the immediate area.

Resident Kim Davenport has her own concerns. "They have to get money from us in order to have money to reinvest in the community. It is silly to build a retail mall in a low-income neighborhood. Our property values are going to go up, rent will go up, and people will not be able to afford good housing."

Project manager for Freedom Square, Steven Vaughn, addressed the concerns of both sets of residents. "We hope the presence of the mall will bring permanent jobs," he said. Already, he said, many Germantown residents, most of them African-Americans, have been hired by Delran Builders to help construct the shopping center.

According to the 14th Police District, the vicinity of the mall "is a heavy drug area, especially near Wakefield and Wister streets."

One resident who was sitting on his porch about two blocks from the construction site, said he is glad the mall will be built. "It should bring the cops around here more." There is a police substation in the 5100 block of Germantown Avenue, but some residents said they are still concerned in the evenings when it closes. "I'm glad there is not going to be a park or a recreation center — those could be turned into a drug drop-off point," he said.

Parents like Davenport have expressed concern about young men hanging out on the corners near Germantown Avenue and Garfield Street, and about the corner bar opening early in the mornings when children have to walk by on their way to school. On the side of a building across from the bar, graffiti messages mock the police.

Vaughn said he has tried to maintain a rapport with the community, and that Delran Builders already shares many of the residents' concerns, including those about safety.

"Even before construction, we worked closely in the area with the Wister Neighborhood Advisory Council. The organization is local and involves all of the blocks in the area as well as community groups. They have a neighborhood lookout and we will have security driving around before and after construction," he said. He said, however, the presence of the mall can not be expected to eliminate drug trafficking in an area.

Germantown Avenue and Wister Street, near Manheim Street, is undergoing a metamorphosis. Construction workers from Delran Builders add daily to the skeleton structure that will eventually be a new shopping center. The area is dusty now, because the street is being repaved. General improvements are already in the works. The mall is expected to be completed by late October.

It is expected to include a Rite Aid, a wine and spirits store operated by the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board, a drycleaner, and a variety store. Area parents, who would like to see a recreation center open in their neighborhood, said they hope a toy store will also open so that they will not have to travel out of the area to find entertainment for children.

The site of the shopping mall has an interesting past. According to tradition, a Philadelphia Quaker named Tonis Kunders made Germantown Avenue and Wister Street a landmark location.

"That was the site of an 18th-century house owned by Tonis Kunders. It was built in 1688. He and three other men who were Quakers wrote the first protest against slavery in the American colonies," said Ann Herman of the Germantown Historical Society.

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