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Off streets, making beats: Richmond envisions youth center

By Sara Steffens
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(Left) A Mural graces the wall of the Youth UpRising center in Oakland. The center is geared toward performing arts, and community leaders hope to install a similar center in Richmond. Seed money has been donated, and a committee is looking to raise more funds.

Photography by Dean Coppola/Times

Most afternoons, Chapp Jackson and Joseph Hopkins can be found in the music studios of Youth UpRising in East Oakland, laying down beats on digital recording software.



(Above) JOSEPH HOPKINS, 20, makes music in a sound studio at the Youth UpRising center in Oakland on Wednesday. Contra Costa Supervisor John Gioia wants to create a similar center in Richmond.

"I'm a regular," said Jackson, 20, scribbling lyrics on a piece of notebook paper. "They've got a lot of stuff that's industry standard here."

"It's not the part of learning it that's hard -- it's the getting better," added Hopkins, better known to his friends as "Nahhdahh" or "Bone Crusher." "I didn't know how to use none of this stuff before the center."

Some youth centers make do with folding chairs and donated basketballs.

Walking into Youth UpRising is more like entering an MTV set -- exactly the sort of vibe Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia hopes to bring to Richmond.

Backed by a team of youth and community leaders, Gioia has begun an effort to convert a vacant county building into a high-tech hangout for West County's young people.

The building, located near 41st Street and MacDonald Avenue, has sat empty for nearly a year since serving as a temporary public defenders office.

Gioia initially thought of turning the space into a youth-run cafe, a program requested by students at Richmond High.

But after touring Youth UpRising this summer, his ambitions grew.

"It felt right," he said of the East Oakland center. "It seemed fun and it was just awesome. I walked in and I said, 'This would be a place that I would have liked to have gone to as a youth.'"

Donors have chipped in seed money, and a planning committee will try to cobble together funding from government agencies, local companies, philanthropic foundations and other nonprofit organizations.

"Putting together centers like this isn't cheap, but the alternative is more expensive," Gioia said.



(Above) Mafi Lapota, 15, relaxes on one of many couches at the Youth UpRising center.

Incarcerating a young adult costs Contra Costa County \$40,000 a year, he added. By keeping youths off the streets in the first place, "the youth center is a much better investment."

Like Youth UpRising, early plans for the proposed Richmond center call for offerings rich in media and performing arts -- activities to appeal to young people who are not into sports or clubs.

"This is designed to really attract kids who might not otherwise go to a youth center," said Gioia. "We're trying to get kids to vote with their feet by walking in and going to that center. It's got to be programmed in a way that makes them want to go there."

So far, Youth UpRising has proved a model of success on that front. Since opening in May, the Oakland center alongside Castlemont High School has attracted more than 1,500 members ages 13 to 24.

On any given afternoon, the building fills with 300 young people, who hang out in the common areas or take workshops on topics such as "turf dancing," filmmaking or DJ mixing.

Music is almost always thumping from several rooms. Young people gossip over quesadillas in the community cafe or drape themselves across plush couches in the Moroccan-style lounge, its walls washed in eggplant, marigold and lime.



(Above) Ashley Hackworth, 15, dances in "Turfin' at it's Best" class in the dance room at the Youth UpRising youth center in Oakland.

"It's become like a cultural center for young people," said Kimberly Aceves, executive director of Youth Together, a nonprofit group that works in Oakland and Richmond. "Where do you go on a Friday night to see a dance battle? Where do you hold a town hall meeting with young people? The center is a space to start having dialogue. Here we have the young people at the table already."

Aceves helped create Youth UpRising and has signed on to help with the Richmond project.

"We want young people to drive the process," she said. "The goal is for them to really envision what they want for the space."

Consultant Sara Kershner, who led the community organizing behind Youth UpRising, will also oversee Richmond's planning process.

Youth UpRising took six years to become reality. Kershner hopes the Richmond center will build on lessons learned and come together more quickly, opening sometime in 2007.

"What really works about Youth UpRising is that so many different stakeholders and parts of the community were involved and engaged and built it," Kershner said. "And that's definitely something we want to re-create."

A new launch committee will oversee decision-making for the center. The committee includes representatives from community groups, the mayor's office, West Contra Costa schools, health-care providers and after-school programs.

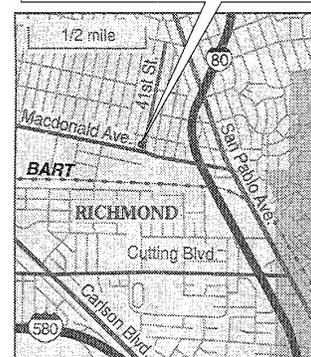
"There's a lot of checks and balances in the room," said Kershner.

Young people will receive stipends to serve on a youth planning council, charged with designing programs and figuring out how to market the center.

Another committee will figure out how to link the center to existing services such as job training, counseling or the neighboring public health clinic.

"The challenge is to create a youth hangout, a safe place that starts with something they enjoy and that's engaging, but that ultimately brings a huge wraparound," said Kershner. "It's gotta have the feel of a place that young

Proposed youth center
County Supervisor John Gioia hopes to turn an abandoned county building into a safe, supervised hangout for Richmond teens.



JONI MARTIN/TIMES

people would want to hang out in. It's got to be secure, but it also has to rely on relationships and a positive culture."

Planning Youth UpRising was hard work, said 20-year-old Danny Mora, who spent three years on the youth council that helped design every aspect of the East Oakland center.

But since Youth UpRising opened, Mora said, it's had no trouble finding members.

"A lot of them didn't have anywhere to go," he said. "Either you were playing a sport or you didn't have anything to do."

Sara Steffens covers poverty and social services. Reach her at 925-943-8048 or ssteffens@cctimes.com.

HOW TO HELP

Donations are being sought to help turn an unused county building into a new Richmond youth center.

Checks may be made out to the East Bay Community Foundation/Richmond Youth Center Project and mailed to County Supervisor John Gioia, 11780 San Pablo, Suite D, El Cerrito, CA 94530. Contributions are tax-deductible.

For details, call 510-374-3231.