

## Richmond eyes dream youth center

Group pushing for safe city setting where youngsters could enjoy and push themselves  
By Katherine Tam

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It would be a center like none Richmond has ever seen.

Teens would mix music and lyrics in a recording studio. They would design Web sites and graphics with digital software. They would spout poetry and spoken word in theater. They would catch air off ramps in a designated skate park, the first in the city.

And they would do it in a place unclaimed by gangs, untainted by ugly turf wars.

"It's a neutral space. It's not in the north or the south," said Greg Ollano, 21, who attended Richmond High School. "It's a safe spot where they don't feel harassed, where they can let down their guard, not worry about anything else, just be able to drop who they are on the outside."

A coalition of youth and youth advocates is turning that idea into something concrete. The RYSE Youth Center is slated to open as early as the fall, aimed at giving 14- to 21-year-olds from West County a place to go and stuff to do to keep them out of trouble.

Doors would stay open as late as 10 or 11 p.m., unlike most centers that usually close by 6 p.m.

Its clientele would be diverse: high school dropouts to the college bound, the homeless to the poor and middle class, victims of violence to those committing the violence, gays and transgendered individuals.

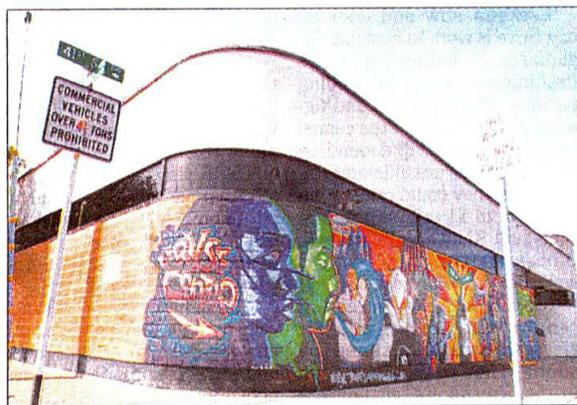
"It would welcome everyone," said county Supervisor John Gioia, who is spearheading the effort. "Part of it is to make it an attractive place for young people to come who wouldn't otherwise come to a youth center."

RYSE was born from a 2003 survey, in which teens pointed to the need for a safe place to hang out into the evening, one that also supplies activities and job training.

In 2005, Gioia and the nonprofit Youth Together corralled teens such as Ollano and youth advocates to create a top-notch center. They pooled ideas for what to offer and how to create a culture that would draw in even the most troubled youth.

At no cost, Gioia secured a 6,600-square-foot building at 205 41st St. the county Health Department and Public Defenders' Office once used. Renovation begin this month, he said.

Lowe's Home Improvement wants to open a 170,000-square-foot store on land at 38th and Bissell, which includes a county health center, the former Toys "R" Us and the new RYSE building. But that shouldn't halt plans to open the youth center, Gioia said.



SHERRY LAVARS/STAFF

**THE RYSE YOUTH CENTER** of West County, a group of youth advocates led by county Supervisor John Gioia, is gaining steam in its effort open a youth center in Richmond.

(more)

## **2-2-2-2 RYSE Youth Center**

"If Lowe's comes in a few years, we'll relocate it," Gioia said. "We're not waiting. We need the youth center now. We'll have it there for a few years before we'd need to move it."

Between now and opening day, there is work to be done. Organizers, including youth, are fleshing out programs, wooing partners, raising funds and figuring out how to staff the center. Operating costs will depend on what programs are ultimately offered, but they could range from \$700,000 to \$1 million the first year, said Kanwarpal Dhaliwal, Gioia's staff member who is working on the project.

Most youth or recreation centers offer dance and art classes, usually planned by adults. They're typically open in the afternoons but not late at night. Students who show up are expected to sign up for a class.

RYSE aims to be different. Less structured and more fluid, people can come here to veg on the couches in the lounge, without having to enroll in a class.

"They need a space where you can come in and chill out and decompress without having to be engaged the moment you walk in," Dhaliwal said. "The intention is that they'll be able to plug into services. We'd encourage it, but not require it, for entry."

Those interested in more than lounging can pick from a buffet of programs planned by youth: a recording studio, dance floor, theater, yoga, martial arts, computer lab with graphics and photography software, even a skate park.

"We know there are a lot of talented people out there. There's just no place to express it," said Carla Bernal, a 17-year-old Richmond High School student.

RYSE also will link youth to job training, mental health support, family planning, and counseling for drug use and violence. A shower will give homeless youth a place to wash up.

The center is open sporadically now, for film nights and poetry nights that youth organize and publicize on popular social networks such as MySpace. The last film night drew a few dozen people.

Organizers hope this place will eventually teem with youth.

"The goal is to ramp this up over time. We are hoping for hundreds of kids," Gioia said.

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