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Around the Region

## Culinary oasis slated for 51st Street

### Local activist says ethnic cuisine will bring 51st Street a taste of success

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In developer Bernard Loyd's dreams, a desolate 51st Street in Bronzeville will be transformed by an ethnic food district that acts as a magnet for other businesses and people tired of eating unhealthy food on the run.

His \$8.6 million project, called Bronzeville Cookin', moved a step closer to fruition this month when the Chicago Community Development Commission recommended it receive \$3 million in tax-increment financing and that the city sell Loyd two vacant lots for parking next to the century-old building he plans to renovate.

The building, in the 300 block of 51st Street, next to the Green Line station, would house four restaurants in 17,000 square feet. Three restaurants would be full-service and one carry-out. There also would be a produce market.

The project is expected to be introduced to the City Council in December or January, said James Wilson, Department of Community Development project manager.

Loyd, 47, a Bronzeville resident and community activist, said the culinary incubator will turn a food desert into an oasis, offering healthier dining options, jobs and a reason to come to the area. Now, residents have more access to fast food than to a grocery store, he said.

"You're not going to come (to Bronzeville) because there's a Gap," he said. "You can get that anywhere."

"Chinatown is a great example. It's a huge economic engine for that community. Thousands are employed, and there are all these other businesses that feed off of that flow of people, such as grocery or specialty food outlets. Most go to Chinatown to dine, but the locals can get what they need in that community."

Each of Bronzeville Cookin's proposed restaurants will showcase distinct African and African-American flavors. Cecelia's Southern Breakfast will offer traditional southern and southern-inspired breakfast and light lunch. Majanji310 will feature African-inspired vegan fare. The Jerk Shack, a carry-out, will offer authentic

Jamaican barbecue. All three, and the produce market, are set to open next year.

A family-friendly Bronzeville Smoke House & Grill, where the decor will celebrate Bronzeville's rich history, is scheduled to open in 2011.

The 51st Street building's white terra cotta and glazed brick facade is a testament to Bronzeville's rich architectural heritage and the area's heyday as the "Black Metropolis" in the early part of the 20th century. Project architect Chris Lee of the firm Johnson & Lee Architects, said he was surprised to discover a childhood connection to the building.

"My pediatrician had his office on the second floor," he said. "He used to have to chase me to give me my polio vaccine."

Today 51st Street remains mostly vacant, but other pockets of the neighborhood are resurging. Over the last five years, such new restaurants as Blu 47, Chicago's Home of Chicken and Waffles, Bronzeville Coffee & Tea, and Ms. Biscuit have becoming local fixtures.

"It's amazing what's happening to this neighborhood," said Richard Mott, a partner in Cecelia's and Jerk Shack, and a consultant for the culinary project. He has lived in Bronzeville for 22 years and his business, Sugarplum Catering, is based there.

"The transformation has been dramatic. Drive up and down the streets and you'll see condo conversions and new construction. What we're hoping to do here is create a critical mass of development that will transform this neighborhood on 51st Street very quickly," Mott said.

Loyd was born on the West Side. When he was 2, he moved with his German mother to Munich and later lived in Liberia before returning to the United States to attend Cornell and MIT. In 1990, he returned to Chicago to work for McKinsey & Co., a management consulting firm where he specialized in agribusiness and became the first African-American partner.

Six years ago, Loyd quit to put his dream project on the front burner.

In his 15 years in Bronzeville, he's been involved in numerous community efforts, including the protest when the legendary blues club and neighborhood institution the Checkerboard Lounge announced it was moving to Hyde Park, and the state's Dan Ryan Task Force, which provided reaction to plans for the expressway reconstruction project. He also served as chairman of the board for Centers of New Horizons, a social service agency.

Loyd's team is comprised primarily of people, who, like him, have a strong connection to the community. "That was intentional," he said. But the talent pool, he added, has not yet yielded someone to help run the produce market, which he considers key to the project.

"We haven't had a produce store in the community since I've lived here," he said. "We've lost that connection. You see a parent walking with their child and if they're having a snack, it's likely a bag of chips or a soda. We are going to reach out and re-educate. It's one of the cores of what we're doing here."

Another goal is to provide jobs; unemployment, he said, is "horrendous." While he was talking a soft-spoken man approached the building, peered inside and said he needed work because he was just laid off. Loyd estimates that Bronzeville Cookin' will bring 130 jobs to the area.

He also hopes to foster more of a sense of neighborhood. Manjani<sup>310</sup> award-winning chef and managing

partner Tsadakeeyah Ben Emmanuel said his 35- to 40-seat venue will feature a community table "to encourage folks to come and share meals whether they know each other or not."

Loyd and company envision Cecilia's to follow in the homey tradition of Gladys' Luncheonette, a former Bronzeville institution.

"Gladys' welcomed everyone," Loyd said. "Cecelia's will be a place where you have a congressman dining at one table and a guy from around the corner at the next table."

Third Ward Ald. Pat Dowell supports the project and submitted a letter of support to the Community Development Commission .

"I believe we are poised for some great things," she said. "This initiative is something that is sorely needed in the community. We have some good restaurants now, but we need many more.

"People feel they have to drive out of the community to sit down and enjoy a meal and that should not be. Last Friday night, I went to a restaurant on the North Side. There were a number of restaurants around it. We had a choice of many. (In Bronzeville) we don't have the same kind of options."

Trez Pugh, co-owner of Bronzeville Coffee & Tea, said he supports Loyd's efforts "150 percent," and added, "If anyone wants to open a sports bar (in Bronzeville), they'll make a killing. People ask me all the time when I'm going to put in a flat-screen television or serve beer, but that would change the character of the place."

Loyd would like to work with Harold Washington Cultural Center and the DuSable Museum of African-American History to enable people to really make an outing of it.

"There has been a return of black professionals to the community because in part of the tremendous architecture at tremendous prices," Loyd said. "You couldn't get this anywhere else in the city. This used to be the place, and I want to be a part of helping to bring it back."

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