



Polish Home Hall opens its doors again

ROBBIE WHELAN

Daily Record Business Writer

June 2, 2009 10:05 PM

Looking out over the abrupt slope of Filbert Street in Curtis Bay, South Baltimore's once-great manufacturing district, the view is one of faded industrial glory. The staggered coal piers of a CSX shipping terminal rise from a mix of active and vacant port and chemical industry-related businesses, and beyond that, the Chesapeake Bay and the Key Bridge.

Up here on the hill, at the corner of Filbert and Fairhaven, sits the Polish Home Hall, at various times in history an ethnic community center, a union hall and a ballroom for the wedding receptions of members of the community, many of whom worked in factories and shipyards below.

Community leaders here are trying to cast a bright spot on the steady decline in manufacturing jobs with a new project: The rebirth of the Polish Home Hall as a community center and neighborhood anchor that might attract new home buyers to the area. The first phase of the project was completed last month, and the hall, with its newly issued occupancy permit, is open for community events.

"It's just been for years the place where people held their parties, held their wedding receptions, baptism parties, the graduation parties, the birthday parties, whatever kind of parties were being held," said Carol K. Eshelman, executive director of the Brooklyn and Curtis Bay Corp. "I had a neighbor who, when I first got this building said, 'Oh, I grew up in that neighborhood. That's where I had my Vietnam War welcome home party!'"

The hall is a stolid, utilitarian building, with red-painted metal molding on the outside and an ornate, molded tin ceiling to its second-floor ballroom. It was originally built about 1907 — the year was inscribed in one of its original wooden beams — as an administrative office for the town of Curtis Bay, when it was part of Anne Arundel County.

Part of the back room served as a firehouse, with a port for a horse-drawn firefighters' carriage. In 1918, when the city annexed Curtis Bay, the space became a factory where workers would sew sails for the shipyards at the harbor. But seven years later, a group of local ethnic groups, organized as the United Polish Societies of Curtis Bay, raised money to purchase the structure.

Catherine Benicewicv, a 90-year-old retiree who grew up in Curtis Bay, went to school at the Polish Home Hall for four years. Her father, Anthony Tarnowski, was one of the community members who managed the building.

"Everybody, all the children attended dances. We had no babysitters," she said. "At the Polish Home, at the many dances they had there, the children were always welcome. The dances that we had on Filbert Street, it was really organized so that we would have a place of our own."

The hall continued as a social center for the community, Benicewicv said, for decades, until the manufacturing industry began its decline in the 1980s.

Shuttered chemical giants

The last ships were built in Curtis Bay some 30 years ago, and lately the local chemical giants have been shuttering, one by one. FMC Corp.'s pesticide-producing factory, which in 2002 employed some 350 people, closed its doors last year, while Sasol North America Inc., which manufactured detergent chemicals in nearby Fairfield, let go of 50 to 100 workers when it shut its plant there in 2007.

"We have seen closures," said Louis Kistner, executive director of the Maryland Industrial Technology Alliance, a state trade association. "The biggest issue, frankly, is the impact of the national trend where industrial operations, if they're moving, are expanding outside of the United States rather than inside the United States."

Brian McHale, who represents Curtis Bay in Maryland's House of Delegates, said he remembers the hall as a gathering place for the local Democratic club in the 1980s.

"We'd all get together, I'd give a five-minute speech, then we'd all have a draft beer," he said.

In 2000, McHale and State Sen. George W. Della Jr. pushed for the formation of the community development corporation that Eshelman now heads. When Eshelman arrived in 2002, one of her first charges, she said, was to do something about the Polish Home Hall, which had fallen vacant and was being vandalized by squatters. In 2004, McHale and Della shepherded a bond issue through the state legislature to raise money for the renovation.

So far, about \$500,000 has been spent to refloor the whole building, preserve the ballroom ceiling, repair windows, doors and bathrooms, and repoint bricks on the building's exterior.

Most of the funds came from the state bond issue, a \$250,000 commitment from the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation and private donations from local churches and residents. A second phase is slated to begin soon, to install an elevator and a new kitchen, bringing the total cost of renovation to about \$1 million. But for now, the building will play host to community bull-roasts and parties, and hopefully a few dances.

Community pride

"I think there's a certain amount of community pride in that building in particular in the sense that the whole community around it is small homes in a very developed area," said Donald Kann, the Baltimore architect who headed the renovation project. "The community recognizes that building. ... Its interest is in its community heritage as opposed to any incredible architecture."

And besides the jobs, Eshelman said, some things don't look so bad in Curtis Bay. The median home price actually rose between 2006 in 2008, from \$73,500 to \$94,000, which is more than double the same statistic for 2001, according to Live Baltimore Home Center, a local nonprofit.

"We've already seen an impact on the houses on this street," Eshelman said, looking out at Filbert Street. "Two of them have building permits on them right now and are being fixed up. ... One of the big hopes that I have is that people will come into Curtis Bay ... to use the hall for events and go, 'Wow, this is a really neat community.' Where do you get a view like this? People have said, this is like San Francisco. You come up over the hill and there's a bridge and water and the coal piers and everything. It's a really neat view of the harbor."

We hope you've enjoyed this article. For more news stories please visit us at [The Daily Record Online!](#)