



Baylor professor hopes to turn Colcord Avenue eyesore into neighborhood hub

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It takes imagination to see the abandoned day care center at 2301 Colcord Ave. as a neighborhood social hub. But the Baylor University professor who bought it last year has plenty of that.

The old building went into foreclosure in 2010, and it was green-tagged last year by city inspectors as unsafe for exposed wiring, holes in the ceiling and a rotting staircase. Vandals had ransacked the interior and stripped out copper wires.

But Laine Scales, an education professor with a social work background, thinks the eyesore can be turned into a neighborhood asset.

She envisions seminary students living upstairs and overseeing community activities downstairs, such as art and English classes, a community garden, worship services, concerts and a cafe where neighbors can chat or read a book.

"The idea here is for neighbors to invest in it and feel like they have ownership," Scales said.

She is working with other urban ministry-minded Waco residents on the project, called the Good Neighbor Settlement House. The group has a board of directors and is seeking tax-exempt nonprofit status. Its leaders last week met with about 20 neighbors to brainstorm ideas and answer questions.

Scales' concept of a "settlement house" comes from her academic research into the history of social work. Beginning in Victorian England, settlement houses gave students and other volunteers a chance to live in poorer neighborhoods and work to strengthen families and communities.

The concept spread to New York and Chicago, home of the famous Hull House, and then in the early 20th century to Southern cities such as Waco, which had the Evangelia Settlement House.

Scales hopes to revive that idea, allowing graduate students to live and minister in an inner-city neighborhood. In exchange for low rents, the students would commit to about 10 hours per week of administrative, pastoral or other volunteer work at the house.

"So many grad students want to live in town, in a neighborhood, away from the 'Baylor bubble,'" said Scales, who is associate dean of Baylor's graduate school.

The idea is to offer space to existing neighborhood churches and volunteer organizations, Scales said.

"We are considering ourselves more as the host of groups already in existence," she said. "Our plan is not to fill it up too much with our own programming."

Scales said her board hopes to pursue grants and private donations of money and time to do the necessary repairs, including

wiring, plumbing and foundation work. The building has a sturdy slate roof that needs minor repairs, and a front room that probably will be converted back to its original use as a front porch.

Scales and her family lived across 23rd Street from the old day care center in a classic old Colcord Avenue home from 2003 to 2008, when she moved to the Baylor campus for a faculty-in-residence program. She didn't want to cut her ties with the neighborhood, and she leased the house to graduate students.

Diverse neighborhood

"I got to understand how strong the Sanger Heights Neighborhood Association is and got a real feel for the neighborhood," she said. "I know it's a very diverse neighborhood with a lot of spirit and a lot of people who want to make the neighborhood better."

Scales said that house, along with two upstairs efficiency units and a garage apartment at the old day care center, could house the live-in volunteers.

The dilapidated building at 2301 Colcord Ave. was built as a house in 1924 but served as the Jack and Jill School from 1939 until it sold in 2006. A church ran the day care center briefly, then sold it to a private operator, who went out of business around 2009.

Rick Allen, a Colcord neighbor and former Waco city councilman who serves on the settlement house's external board, said the building has deteriorated rapidly in recent years.

"It was a public hazard," he said. "There were holes in the ceiling and animals coming in and out."

Joan Supplee, a Baylor history professor who lives on Parrott Avenue behind the old day care center, said the property became a magnet for vandals, who then destroyed other property around the neighborhood.

Supplee was among those who attended last week's neighborhood meeting at Allen's house regarding the project.

Supplee raised questions about parking for the center's activities, and questioned whether the current zoning would permit the proposed use.

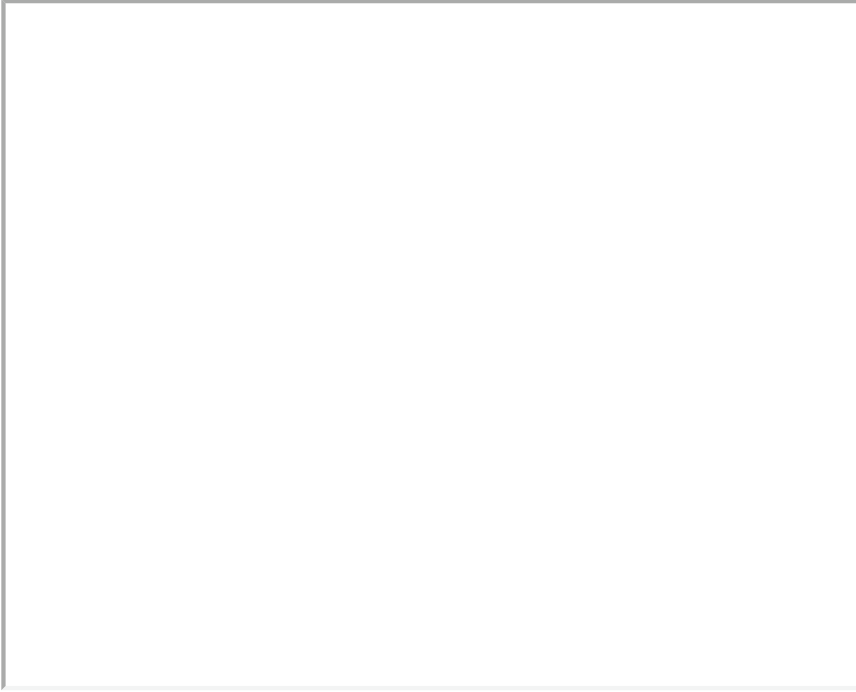
Allen said the day care center had been grandfathered as a commercial use but that has expired, meaning the property likely would have to get new zoning.

Supplee said she would prefer to see the building turned into a single-family home, but she said that is unlikely.

"For me, the Good Neighbor House would be a second choice, but it's a good second choice," she said. "I like the idea of having someone living there permanently. I think, for our neighborhood, it's critical to have a space that brings the neighborhood together."

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