

Hill Center Receives Prestigious Federal Grant

Award Will Help Support Vital Restoration Effort

BY MIKE CANNING

The much anticipated Hill Center project, which soon will transform the Old Naval Hospital at Ninth Street and Pennsylvania Avenue SE into a bustling center for education and community life, received welcome recognition and financial backing in December from Save America's Treasures (SAT).

A joint undertaking of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities and the National Park Service, SAT awarded a \$150,000 grant to the Old Naval Hospital Foundation, which is heading up the restoration of the historic site. The long-neglected landmark was the only structure in the District on SAT's list of grants for 2009.

The city-approved plan for the Hill Center will give the Old Naval Hospital site a thorough historic restoration and transform it into a campus-like setting for lifelong learning, cultural enrichment and community events.

The plan reflects the input of hundreds of Hill residents and was approved by the DC government in 2007 after a lengthy process of competitive bidding and review. An ambitious fundraising effort is now under way, and construction is expected to begin this winter.

In announcing the 2009 SAT grants, which totaled \$9.5 million nationwide, first lady Michelle Obama said, "These awards empower communities all over the country to rescue and restore this priceless heritage and ensure that future generations continue to learn from the voices, ideas, events and people represented by these projects."

The SAT statement noted that the Old Naval Hospital is "a rare example of an intact, purpose-built Civil War-era hospital, which has remained largely unchanged since its construction."

Old Naval Hospital Foundation President Nicky Cymrot enthusiastically welcomed SAT's support. "The Hill Center will give community members of all ages a vital new place for learning, recreation and growth," she said, "and we're extremely grateful for this help."

The center will offer classes and courses in a wide variety of subjects – computer literacy, foreign languages, music, dance, ESL, cooking and nutrition, and more – and its rooms also will provide space for lectures, performances, art exhibits, after-school tutoring and community meetings, along with offices for some neighborhood organizations.

The historic carriage house near the northwest corner of the site will be transformed into a family friendly café, which also will provide food services for events in the main building.

One of the area's most distinctive landmarks, the Old Naval Hospital was opened in 1866, just after the Civil War, to serve as a 50-bed facility for seamen of the Potomac. Its first patient was Benjamin Drummond, an African-American sailor admitted for treatment of an unhealed gunshot wound suffered in the war. The hospital later was used as a Hospital Corps training school and then as a home for old soldiers and sailors.

After 1963, while still a federal property but under long-term lease to the DC government, the building served a variety of uses, including headquarters for the effort to establish the Martin Luther King Jr. national holiday.

It was also used by arts groups and social service agencies, and its separate carriage house became an office for the Community Action Group, which provides drug addiction treatment. The main building, however, has been essentially vacant for more than a decade, although the local advisory neighborhood commission still meets there.

Restoring the Old Naval Hospital to create the Hill Center is an ambitious undertaking. Cymrot says the project will cost about \$10 million, with more than half of that amount already committed by the DC government. In addition to the new SAT grant, significant other support will come from historic preservation tax credits and from the Capitol Hill Community Foundation, which has committed \$250,000. Roughly \$3 million now must be raised from community members, foundations and other private sources.

"This SAT grant is another important step in getting us to our financial goal," says Cymrot, "and it's particularly encouraging because of the recognition that comes with it. The Old Naval Hospital is a very important landmark, and it's critical that we save it for the benefit of the community."

On the internet: the Hill Center, www.oldnavalhospitalfoundation.org; and the Capitol Hill Community Foundation, www.capitolhillcommunityfoundation.org.

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