

EAST BOSTON

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Cool new vibe on tap at old firehouse

\$4.2m music, arts center set for '08

By Paysha Stockton Rhone, Globe Correspondent | July 29, 2007

For two years, the sign on the old brick firehouse in East Boston has intrigued neighbors: "Future Home of ZUMIX Performing Arts Center." But its windows remain boarded, its doors closed.

The vibrant nonprofit youth music organization in Maverick Square bid successfully in 2005 to acquire the closed Sumner Street fire station from the city for \$322,000. To excited supporters, that might seem like an eternity ago, acknowledged executive director Madeline Steczynski.

But with \$2 million pledged, \$2 million pending, and a recent thumbs-up from the city's zoning board, plans for the new \$4.2 million center are cruising.

ZUMIX, which teaches teens how to play and perform hip-hop, pop, and rock, as well as produce radio shows and do music tech, hopes to close on the sale this fall, begin construction in early 2008, and move in by the end of the year.

"People always ask me, what's going on?" Steczynski said, laughing. "But it doesn't feel like a long time to me."

That's because ZUMIX is busy -- raising money, hiring staff, making plans, and helping four teens make recommendations to designers who will renovate the 1924 firehouse. With 7,000 square feet of usable space, the three-story building will double the center's space, making room for a theater, professional recording studio, meeting room, radio station, a computer lab, and instrument storage.

It was important to include the youngsters, who represent the 16-year-old center's 350 musicians, said Steczynski, a founder. "This is primarily a building that's going to be used for young people, so it needs to be fun and funky."

The teen design team visited other inspiring buildings this spring, including Lowell's Revolving Museum, Cloud Place in Copley Square, the Berklee College of Music, and the Christian Science Center. They noted design choices -- lighting, signs, flooring, furnishings -- and mulled them afterward.

Team member Jennifer Aldana loved the Revolving Museum, with its recycled materials. "It was just really artsy and really imaginative," said the 14-year-old singer from Revere.

Aldana said it was a challenge to weigh what's cool against what's safe, environmentally conscious and acoustically optimal.

Some youth recommendations might surprise, like the basement floor made of cork. Others won't; the teens want to reinstall at least one fire pole, in honor of the old Engine Company 40, whose building closed in 1981. "We wanted to keep the whole firehouse feeling," Aldana said. "But we don't really want people using it, for safety."

Steczynski agreed any pole should be symbolic. "People sliding down from 15 feet above makes me a little nervous."

So far, the teens have presented recommendations to ZUMIX staff and board members, project designers Mostue & Associates, and architect Michael Interbartolo. Presentations may also be made to neighbors and the East Boston Community Development Corporation, the center's partner in the project.

Al Caldarelli, president of the corporation, said working with the arts group has been unique. His organization will contribute \$1 million to the center through cash and waived development fees, he said. Other funds came from private and corporate donations, grants, government sources and even bands, such as Pearl Jam.

"It's the biggest [investment] we've ever done," said Caldarelli, laughing at the novelty of working with a teen design team. The corporation is accustomed to building mental health services and elderly housing, he added. "It kind of got us excited about what the arts can do for the kids and East Boston as a whole." The new center is a place for kids to learn, Caldarelli said, but also "adds to the cachet of the environment. It just made us want to get it done."

Steczynski said ZUMIX loves its well-worn, longtime home. But the recording studio isn't soundproof, and there's no room to grow. "This building feels like your favorite pair of old jeans," she said. But the new center will belong to

ZUMIX, mortgage-free. "It gives us an actual home."

For more information, visit zumix.org. ■

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