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Holly Center to rise from ashes?

Burned-down ex gang hangout could become school, office space, housing, etc.

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Terrance Roberts, Denver City Councilwoman Carla Madison and Mayor John Hickenlooper help plant a garden yesterday morning near the Holly Center, the shopping center that burned down last May in gang-related activities. Photo by Gene Davis.

Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, or the Denver Nuggets rebounding from a disappointing Game 1 loss, the former site of the Holly Center has the chance to rise up into something better than it was before, said Mayor John Hickenlooper yesterday. The Urban Land Conservancy (ULC) — a group that acquires, develops and/or preserves land for a variety of uses — purchased the Holly land last month. The Park Hill shopping center was burned down on May 18, 2008, in gang-related activities. The ULC has not announced its plans for how it will develop the land. A charter school, office space for nonprofits or affordable housing are all possibilities for the space going forward, said speakers at yesterday's press conference.

"Today is a new day," said Michele Wheeler, president of the Northeast Park Hill Coalition. "We have been given an opportunity to build a bigger and better Holly Center. We must look to the future and embrace what can be; our common vision should go beyond the sky, not accept as we always have that the limit is the sky."

Hickenlooper and Denver City councilwoman Carla Madison stressed their hopes that the redeveloped space would be used to build a school. A library and recreation center are nearby the Holly Center, which would be perfect for a school to utilize, said Madison.

Mixed memories

Terrance Roberts of the Prodigal Son Initiative said he has many memories from the Holly Center. The shopping center was where he learned how to ride a bicycle and drive a car, but the Park Hill spot was also where he joined a gang and is nearby where he was almost shot to death.

"I really thought I lost a friend last year when the Holly shopping center burned down," he said. "But it's going to be a blessing for this community. (This) is going to be a tremendous, uplifting, positive thing for this community that has been blighted ... Now we can build something better, now we can build something new."

The ULC purchased the Holly Center site on April 8, 2009. The ULC used \$550,000 in ULC assets and loans and \$200,000 in funding from the Denver Office of Economic Development to purchase the property, according to a press release.

The city funded the project through a \$100,000 Community Development Block Grant, funding that is restricted for use in blighted areas, and a \$100,000 loan from the Office of Economic Development's Business Improvement Fund.

Hickenlooper said the city had no choice but to move immediately to help fund the redevelopment of the Holly Center space. "You let (the burned down Holly Center) hang out too long, it's like letting the Lakers hang on too long; it's not a good idea," he said.

The ULC is putting together a group of community and neighboring property owners to further discussions on what they believe Holly Center should be developed into. The ULC is already underway in discussions with two organizations that have interest in developing a charter school on the Holly site, and a decision on this option might be made in the next six to nine months, according to ULC.

“Community participation is critical to moving forward with the redevelopment of the Holly as well as other neighboring properties,” said a statement from ULC president Aaron Miripol. “This is a new day for the Holly property and our work together has just begun.”