



Central Union Mission.  
Photo: Andrew Lightman

# CENTRAL UNION MISSION

Bringing Housing and Retail to Georgia Avenue

BY MARK F. JOHNSON

**T**o relocate from Mid City to Georgia Avenue in Petworth proved to be mission impossible for one of the city's largest and oldest homeless shelters. Once folks in the com-

munity learned of the Central Union Mission's intention to build a 150 to 200-bed men's shelter in their neighborhood, stiff opposition mounted and Mission leaders retreated to work on a Plan B.

What they came back with seems

to have quelled most concerns in the community and has even forged a partnership rarely seen in dealings between the District's bureaucracy and neighborhood advocates. Their plan to build workforce housing on the vacant land, originally intended for the shelter, has recently won the approval of both the local Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC) and the Bureau of Zoning Adjustment (BZA). Even though some are still concerned that Central Union Mission leaders might build a smaller shelter anyway, most are satisfied with the Mission's promise not to. In addition, Mission leader David Treadwell has added a sweetener that was hard to resist. He has promised to bring downtown style retail development space to Petworth, a community hungry for up-scale retail where only small bodegas, fast food joints and liquor stores stand now.

ANC 1A08 Commissioner Cliff Valenti, who supports the Mission's efforts to build on the land and believes they will keep their word, said, "we should be thinking about getting some action going on Georgia Avenue." The project proposed by the Mission, an approximately 12,000 sq. foot construction, with nearly 40 affordable units and ground floor retail space, spurs development, he said. Everyone involved seems to look at this as the end-goal.

The dream of at least some Petworth residents is to see the area blossom into another Columbia Heights, at least in terms of economic development. According to Darren Jones, a long-time resident of the neighborhood and President of the Pleasant Plains Civic Association, other businesses would have been reluctant to come to the area if the homeless had moved in. There is even a story that a local bank that sits steps away from the Mission-owned land, had threatened to move out if the shelter opened. "Having a shelter here would have clearly stunted growth," Jones believes.

Buddy Moore, who represents Luray/Warder Street Block Association said that his group of long-time residents have been working to get "neighborhood servicing" businesses like dry cleaners, dvd rentals, home décor shops, coffee bars, and other similar

businesses to move to the community for a long time. "We envisioned a lot of things here, but not a huge homeless shelter," he stated.

David Treadwell believes that the Mission's Plan B ought to satisfy those concerns. "This is something we have to do," he argued. After the Mission agreed not to relocate the shelter on the land, they had to figure out what to do with the property for financial reasons. As the Mission is a tax-exempt entity, the District has forfeited property tax payments on the parcels but in June of 2010 the property will go to tax sale if not developed. Treadwell is responsible for keeping the doors open. The Central Union Mission shelter has found a home in Washington since 1884. Over the last 125 years, it has grown

bookstores, they see falling property values and purse snatchings. Residents who have been in the neighborhood longer are usually the ones to point out the benefits of Central Union Mission's proposal. "This is a dramatic improvement over the vacant lot that is sitting there now," noted Mark Anderson who works with seniors in the Park Morten housing community. The businesses that used to occupy the site have all closed and currently those buildings sit empty and abandoned. "The people who would live here, like teachers and police officers, are definitely the kinds of people we want among us," Jones added.

William H. Jordan, ANC1A05 Commissioner, noted that low income and crime are not necessarily synony-

Valenti said he can understand why those in the Park View area feel the way they have about the possibility of living with the shelter in their community. "These big homeless shelters aren't good for people or the neighborhoods they serve," he argued. "It really isn't a good idea for homeless people to be [ghettoized] either." "There are already several homeless shelters in our community," he pointed out, naming La Casa at 14th and Park Road and also the Catholic Charities shelter further up Georgia Avenue. Although La Casa is more accurately in Columbia Heights, lower Petworth arguably has more homeless shelters than, say Georgetown, which has none that anyone could name.

### A Place to Call Home

The Mission must vacate its current building by 2011. The building, with the "Come Unto Me" sign that used to light up, has been sold for development as offices. The 14th Street corridor has taken off as a development hotspot and a homeless shelter stands out like a stain next to the freshly painted and shiny new structures.

The Central Union Mission is now in talks with the District government to convert the old Gales School on Massachusetts Avenue near the Union Station into the new shelter. While the neighborhood surrounding the Gales school is also developing, mostly with chic condominiums, rental apartments and gleaming glass

office towers, apparently the Mission has received support from its would-be downtown neighbors to spruce up the Gales School for the shelter. The school has been used as a shelter in the past but right now it's boarded up.

As the nights turn chillier, Treadwell sounds assured of his mission. "I will have a place for my people come time for the shelter to close," he concluded. "I will do what it takes to make that happen." ★



Proposed new structure on Georgia Avenue

in terms of numbers of people it serves and also in terms of endowment.

To appease the community, while at the same time honoring its *raison d'être*, which is to help those who need help, the Mission settled on the idea to build housing for people who may not be easily able to afford the standard Washington DC market rate, namely teachers, firefighters, police officers.

### All Poor People Aren't Criminals

Yet despite what most see as a workable solution, there are those who are not completely convinced. Generally they are newcomers to the community and, they equate "workforce housing" with "low income" housing. Instead of being swayed by the prospect of internet cafes and independent

mos. "There are lots of hardworking individuals who have been in these neighborhoods all or most of their lives who are just as fed up with the crime as those who have just moved here," according to Jordan. Others, including District Office of Planning staff, have tried to drive home the point that workforce housing is not the same as low-income or even mixed-income housing. Neither of the latter two terms accurately describes the Central Union Mission's project they pointed out. To qualify for workforce housing means earning an income between 50 and 80 percent of the area median income. Translated, this means that a family of 4 with a total income of \$48,000 could move into a unit.

Although he sees it differently,