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**A DECADE AFTER IT CLOSED, GERMANTOWN HIGH SCHOOL IS SET TO REOPEN NEXT YEAR AS A MIXED-USE DEVELOPMENT**







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# THIS PROGRAM PRESCRIBES A BREATH OF FRESH AIR FOR HEALTH AND WELLNESS



## Awbury Arboretum is just one of the partner sites that has free programming to bring nature activities to patients

By Maleka Fruean  
Germantown Info Hub

You're handed a prescription from your primary doctor. It reads, "Go to a nature program at Awbury Arboretum." It takes you to the Prescribe Outside website, where you can see partnering locations like Awbury in Germantown, Cobbs Creek Community Environmental Center, and other natural spots around the city participating in all kinds of activities outside.

It's one way that Prescribe Outside introduces outdoor activity and time spent in nature to families in our area. They partner with doctors from the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP), outdoor educators, researchers, and partner sites to bring a variety of free nature programming to families to increase the overall physi-

cal and mental health and wellness of families.

The program came out of observations from physicians on increased anxiety, mild depression, and overall increased use of screen time in their patients. There has been growing research about the effects of spending time in nature and how it could positively impact behavioral health.

"Our physicians, through CHOP, write prescriptions for patients, and it brings them to our website where we have free programming," said Grace Parker, Prescribe Outside's program coordinator. "It's all outdoor activities facilitated by our environmental educators at Let's Go Outdoors. Their key messaging is they want to make sure if you don't feel comfortable outside, they help facilitate a positive experience, so we're really excited to be working with them," Parker continued. Parker says the key is safe, accessible, and free programming for everyone. She told the Prescribe Outside team that some folks

might need guidance on what to do in nature, so they work with all their community partners to provide many different access points to getting outside. Activities like a spirited hike, a nature craft that promotes focus, and bubble walks, which Parker says might seem simple, are great ways to get kids to control their breathing and calm their nervous system.

Dr. Barbara Rolnick, a pediatrician for over 30 years and a primary care doctor at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) in the Roxborough location, has been prescribing getting out in nature for over ten years.

Rolnick personally observed how mental health in kids was affected by increased use of screen time and less outside play, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. "Everybody had a hard time, but particularly the kids in Philadelphia because they couldn't go to school and they were trapped in their houses," said Rolnick. "The play-

grounds had caution tape around them. They were stuck inside, stuck on their devices, staring at a computer all day for school, not having enough outdoor activity," Rolnick said. She saw it affecting kids physically and emotionally, and she and her colleagues anecdotally observed how there were more anxiety and depression health crises in emergency rooms at that same time. Some of it, she says, was definitely COVID-19 related, but some of it she was not getting outside and getting physical activity.

Rolnick also noted how mental health was also being affected by long waits, sometimes up to four to six months, to book appointments with counselors. In the meantime, she said, there's a lot of research that backs spending time outside helping folks with their overall mental well-being.

"I have one family that lived very close to Penny-pack Park and had never gone there," said Rolnick. "They had teenage kids that were mildly depressed, not that happy, and we recommended them to go as a family and spend some time at Penny-pack Park on a regular basis. They loved it, and they still go now on a regular basis, and they thanked me for that."

"They said we lived there all this time, and we never made it part of our life. And now it's something they do almost every weekend. They do it together. They turn off their phones and just hang out together."

Rolnick says prescriptions for outside time are just like taking care of your basic health in so many other ways; she compares it to taking vitamins to prevent deficiencies. She recommends outdoor time to her patients alongside a healthy diet and good sleep as basic parts of health.

"I've been a pediatrician for 33 years. I've seen a real change in the health and wellness of our kids. I've seen how, over time, part of it is too much time on the screens and not enough time playing outside."

For more information on upcoming Prescribe Outside events at Awbury Arboretum, you can always check out their event calendar. And you can check out Prescribe Outside events at other sites on their website.



# A DECADE AFTER IT CLOSED, GERMANTOWN HIGH SCHOOL IS SET TO REOPEN NEXT YEAR AS A MIXED-USE DEVELOPMENT



The neighborhood high school closed in 2013 along with nearly two dozen others.

By Aaron Moselle  
WHYY

A historic school building in Germantown is slated to reopen by next summer — more than a decade after academic performance and shrinking enrollment closed the hulking property amid a financial crisis at the School District of Philadelphia. Developers are converting the former Germantown High School into a mixed-use development with approximately 240 apartments. The first 45 units are expected to be completed in the next 6-8 months. The entire project could wrap up as early as 2025.

“Construction will be moving along at a pretty quick pace,” said architect David Polatnick during a packed community meeting held Thursday night.

The news came nearly two years after Germantown Development, the property’s second new owner, began transforming the property on Germantown Avenue, a by-right project that has frustrated residents still heartbroken over the decision to close the neighborhood’s only public high school after 99 years in the community.

Thursday’s meeting was the

first time since construction started that developers publicly discussed the highly-anticipated revamp with neighbors, a fact that left several residents seeking basic details about the privately-funded project.

“You said some of these units are already done, when was the building sold?” asked one attendee. Germantown Development, a Philadelphia-based limited liability company, bought the high school from The Concordia Group in 2017, securing the necessary permits about two years later. The company plans to transform the interior of the property over four phases and offer studio, one-bedroom, and two-bedroom apartments. Some will be multilevel while others will be flats, said Polatnick.

The second phase will see 57 units come online. The third phase will have 99 units. The final phase will see approximately 40 units.

The building will repurpose the high school’s back parking lot, which contains roughly 180 spots. The project will also have about 3,000 square feet of ground floor commercial space, which may feature a coffee shop.

“We want to bring a nice beautiful project for the community that can benefit everyone — the people living next door, the people

living nearby. We’re just trying to satisfy everyone,” said operations Nir Alon after the meeting. During the meeting, several residents raised concerns about affordability.

Anthony Fullard, president of West Powelton Development, told the audience the project will have a mix of market-rate and affordable units, including ADA-compliant units for low-income residents with disabilities. He said the development team is working out some of those details with

neighbors or a reporter. “That’s inside information,” said Fullard. “It’s in the millions.” WHYY thanks our sponsors — become a WHYY sponsor

Thursday’s meeting came as developers also work to reopen Germantown Town Hall and the former Germantown YWCA, two neighborhood landmarks that residents also desperately want to see redeveloped after years of vacancy and blight.

City Councilmember Cindy

owned property is viable.

Fullard wants to transform the historic building into a mixed-use development with apartments, event space, and office space. Plans may also include space for a restaurant and units for short-term rental through Airbnb. He also wants to build a separate apartment building that would sit directly behind the town hall structure. Ohio-based KBK Enterprises wants to transform the Y into a mixed-use development with 45 units of af-



the help of Liberty Resources, a nonprofit that works with that population. For now, it’s unclear how many units will be affordable and how many will be market-rate. Fullard and his partners also haven’t settled on monthly rents for the project, a source of concern for some residents as the neighborhood continues to attract attention from developers.

It’s also unclear how much the project will cost to complete. Fullard refused to divulge that information to

Bass, first elected in 2012, said she’s optimistic all three assets can be revived in the near future.

“These projects do have life and they are moving. So we want people to stay optimistic and positive about Germantown and what Germantown can be,” said Bass. Fullard hopes to be the developer for Germantown Town Hall. He has a memorandum of understanding with the Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation, which will determine if his company’s redevelopment plan for the city-

fordable housing. The company is still working to secure financing for the \$18 million project.

*Photo Credits:  
Developers plan to transform the high school into a mixed-used development with nearly 250 apartments. (Courtesy of Germantown Development)*





# 'I WANT HER TO BE WANTED': ZONING DECISION COULD JEOPARDIZE PHILLY'S COLORED GIRLS MUSEUM



Colored Girls Museum founder, Vashti DuBois, on the museum's porch, famous for the portraits captured there, in Philadelphia's Germantown neighborhood. (Kimberly Paynter/WHYY)

The museum needs variances to continue operating out of private residence in Germantown.

By Aaron Moselle  
WHYY

On a quiet residential street in Germantown, a cloud of uncertainty hangs over a beloved twin home. For nearly a decade, the three-story Victorian on Newhall Street has maintained two intertwined identities: a personal residence and an intimate art museum celebrating the lives of ordinary Black women. The Colored Girls Museum, believed to be the first and only one of its kind, has attracted national and international attention since opening. But it appears it only recently landed on the city's radar, a fact that now threatens to derail the museum.

"Moving the museum would be, no pun intended, an enormous lift. And I don't know that we have decided with any real de-

gree of certainty how we might do that," said Brooke Whitaker-Royster, the museum's managing director. The trouble started with a complaint filed with Philly311, the city's customer service center for non-emergency inquiries. It's unclear who notified 311, but the move resulted in a pair of code violations that now sit at the center of an appeal before the Zoning Board of Adjustment, the independent panel empowered to make legally binding decisions about what proposed developments get built, and what property owners are permitted to do to their homes. Under the city's zoning code, a museum can't be housed in a building that's a twin without a variance, an approved deviation from the law. A museum that's also a residence would require the same consent.

With help from pro bono attorneys, the museum submitted a zoning permit application with the city, but it

was rejected, setting up a virtual hearing on Wednesday with the zoning board. To co-founder and executive director Vashti DuBois, who has called the twin home for more than 20 years, the museum's value should be clear to the board. "There's nothing else like this anywhere. That seems pretty good for Philadelphia," said DuBois.

The Colored Girls Museum evolved from a show offered through the Philadelphia Fringe Festival in 2015.

The exhibit was a tribute to DuBois' late husband Albert Stewart, who died in a car accident not far from Newhall Street a few years beforehand. The show also helped DuBois manage the pain of losing Stewart, whom she met in junior high school and considered her soulmate. "It just felt like a way to honor the time we had here with our children and our relationship," DuBois said.

Fast forward, and the muse-

um now offers tours five days a week with the help of three part-time staffers, a consultant, and a handful of volunteers. DuBois, who depends on the museum for her livelihood, is the museum's only full-time staffer.

Since 2019, the museum has been grant-funded, with each curated exhibit turning over about once a year.

To date, more than 200 artists, the majority from Philadelphia, have displayed their work with the museum. The list includes murals, portraits, mobiles, and mosaics — carefully placed throughout the house's nine rooms, and everywhere in between.

"People use the word organic, and I guess that's as close to it as it gets. But what is the thing that becomes a thing, that becomes a thing because it's so much bigger than what you could have ever imagined for yourself?" said DuBois.

DuBois will walk into Wednesday's zoning hear-

ing armed with nearly 100 letters of support, and the backing of the registered community organization for her section of Germantown. The City Planning Commission will make a recommendation to the ZBA during the hearing, but it's their policy not to opine on cases until after an appellant has presented their case to the board.

The commission's comprehensive plan for the museum's section of the neighborhood recommends residential use for the area. "It's not unusual for the Planning Commission staff recommendations to the ZBA to stray. There is room for interpretation in the code," said city spokesperson

If the zoning board denies the variances, the museum will appeal the decision in Philadelphia Common Pleas Court, said DuBois. Whitaker-Royster is cautiously optimistic that it won't come to that.

"My hope is to assume that those things that we've been told are true, which is that there is value in the museum's existence," said Whitaker-Royster. "There is some fear for myself personally that we might want to make an example of someone who didn't follow the rules."

DuBois insists she would stop operating the museum out of her home if she's unable to get the necessary approvals.

"So often women and girls of the African Diaspora are not wanted in places," said DuBois. "I want her to be wanted. And not just wanted, but supported in that wanting. So if that's not the case, it would feel disingenuous to in any way keep her here."





# COMMUNITY GARDEN TRIUMPHS OVER DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE



The Pulaski-Zeralda Garden sign. (GIH | Rasheed Ajamu)

By Rasheed Ajamu  
Germantown Info Hub

At the intersection of Pulaski Avenue and Zeralda Street, you can find a thriving community garden where you might spot tomatoes or peppers growing. The Pulaski-Zeralda Garden has stood on that corner for more than three decades, serving as a gathering place for community members to come together and cultivate plants and relationships.

However, a potential development loomed, risking the garden's future. In response, caretakers and neighbors of the garden spoke out to protect the valuable community resource—and, in the end, were victorious.

On September 19th, members of the community and garden stewards gathered online for a meeting regarding the plot of land located at 4535 Pulaski Avenue. The meeting was hosted by Faith Community Development Corporation (Faith CDC) and was a registered community organization (RCO) meeting. The meeting aimed to discuss the proposed plan, which sought various variances for the property. Most notable was the eight-unit variance for the plot of land zoned for an RTA-1, typically intended for no more than two families. Darryl Williams, the own-

er, and his team, including his lawyer Alex Goldberg, who led the presentation, presented the plan and received feedback from the community.

From the meeting, it seemed that there were two primary concerns: the communication between the developer's team and the surrounding community and the height of the proposed building. To appeal the original refusal of the eight-unit property from the Zoning Board of Adjustments (ZBA), Williams' team obtained signatures of support from the surrounding community. While he received 91 signatures, some attendees spoke up, saying the project being considered at the hearing differed greatly from what they said they were supporting. Some attendees reported that certain supporters were allegedly given misleading information regarding the details of this project. Some were told that it would be a single-family home, others were told there would be a parking lot, and others were told there would be parking permits for the surrounding blocks for said lot.

Williams refuted these claims during the meeting, and managing partner Ki-sha Walker told the Germantown Info Hub (GIH) they were "very transpar-

ent" about what would be built there. In fact, she says their experience was the opposite, saying, "There was excitement about the building, being that it was a minority builder," and even helping residents look into zoned street parking permits with the Philadelphia Parking Authority (PPA). Along with communication concerns, representatives of Neighborhood Gardens Trust (NGT), the organization that has owned the garden since 2005, expressed concerns about the developer's team's inability to acknowledge an informal offer from them to purchase the lot at fair market value. In the meeting, Goldberg said, "To our knowledge, there's no offer for fair market value from an informal or from a legal perspective," after a neighbor noted confusion about the continuation of the RCO meeting when there was an offer on the table.

NGT Executive Director Jennifer Greenberg said, "It was very puzzling why they wouldn't at least acknowledge that our attorney had been in contact with them." When the garden's legal representative, Yvonne Haskins, clarified that she had been conversing with them for several weeks and stated that NGT was still looking to purchase the property, Gold-

berg declared miscommunication and said, "We are happy to have a conversation."

The second biggest concern, the structure's height, also raised much discussion because it would block sunlight to the garden. Nothing currently sits at the property. However, no matter the structure built, the potential for shade could affect crops growing in the garden. Constructing a four-story building would significantly impact the green space.

Williams' team prepared a sun study during the summer solstice to show what effect the project would have on the garden. According to the sun study rendering, the garden would be most affected at 11 a.m., with almost half of the lot shaded, 1 p.m. shading practically a quarter of the lot, and 3 p.m. shading nearly none. Tracy Savage, a garden steward, went on record to raise an important question: the summer solstice is the sunniest day of the year, so what about the rest of the year? A clear response wasn't provided, but Goldberg did say he would get together with Williams to see what they could offer garden representatives to calm some of their reservations.

Altogether, the meeting was a cycle of similar questions and concerns centered around parking, communication, garden impact, increased density, (lack of) community benefits, and other topics, with an overwhelming sense that the majority attending the meeting disagreed with the project.

Greenberg says they had yet to receive a final count of the votes taken at the meeting, as they were still being counted when the developer asked for a continuance from the ZBA. Due to the continuance

requested by Williams' team, the ZBA meeting, scheduled for the next week on September 26 at 2 p.m. via Zoom, was canceled. After that, GIH spoke with garden stewards, asking about thoughts and feelings as things remained unclear. Savage spoke with GIH after the meeting, saying that the building built at Pulaski and Berkley (across the street) already blocks the sun from that angle enough. She says, "It doesn't cross over, but it's to the fence of our garden. So if you build another building that's going to be four stories high, it's definitely going to shade our garden." Savage, like other attendees, feels that a rendering for one day of the year shouldn't serve as a model for potential long-term impact.

Dee Dee Risher, a former garden steward, says that a potential project would severely impact the garden's services. "We have a kind of community housing arrangement that we share some food with," Risher shares. "And we put food in the community fridge, so that will be much less." She says this is just the physical and personal impact, pointing to other issues.

She continues: "And I think it's just there is a psychological level where you want to believe the rhetoric our politicians put out, that community voices matter, that quality of life matters, and all of this takes consideration over economic gain... it just feels like there's no advo-

**GERMANTOWN  
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President

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cacy on the part of the people who have the power to represent our area in the halls of power. It's just very disheartening... and it's hard to inspire people."

The garden holds a special psychological significance for Savage, who considers it a "healing space," both now and five years ago when she was going through a difficult time. She credits her mother for convincing her to take up gardening. The garden also has generational value for those like Savage, whose mother and grandmother also gardened there. Risher's family, including her children, have also worked in the garden. Savage said the possibility of seeing this space affected would "put a dimmer [on her] light."

Savage shares that the garden was unaware when the lot at 4535 was sold and that they only found out when the Williams appeal process to acquire vari-

ances began. With this unfamiliarity, she says the garden had started to think about ways that 4535 could become an expansion of the garden, opening it for broader use for the community.

She said, "We wanted to grow a beautiful green space for the neighborhood, and we wanted to add more [grow] boxes. We wanted to make it like an orchard, where we put fruit trees all around. And maybe build a little stage where we could have classes. Or maybe if a neighbor wanted to barbecue, they could get [our permission]. However it's done, we are still planning things with that, so we're not quite sure." While the horizon seemed cloudy before, it should be much clearer now. When answering questions about the future of the 4535 lot, managing partner Walker revealed the new plans. She said, "We have decided it is in the best interest to work with the commu-

nity gardeners and community to sell the parcel directly to them."

Walker said they have been in consistent contact with the garden since the September 19 meeting and have reached a mutual agreement, comprehending the intentions to expand the garden.

When asked if there were any sentiments they wanted to lend around neighbors who felt misinformed during the process, Walker said, "We sincerely apologize if there was any confusion during our outreach with the residents as it was greatly positive during our individual dialogues with everyone. We understand how sensitive this can be and have been continuously open to working with the community on this to the point of withdrawing our zoning application and selling the parcel to them." When asked about this new update, Risher said, "It was thrilling to share with our gardeners and

neighbors we stopped building plans that would have so negatively affected our garden's viability. But it was completely awesome to share that Neighborhood Garden Trust was able to purchase that lot for us. This expands green space for the community and expands the garden. As over-development threatens to increase neighborhood density, it is so gratifying to have a win because people showed up and spoke out."

NGT's Greenberg stated that they aim to finalize the purchase of the lot in December and are excited about the expansion of the garden. Although they are actively looking to buy the property, they still require support. NGT, a Philadelphia-based land trust, ded-

icated to preserving community gardens, is currently seeking donations through its Gaining Ground campaign. By having resources on reserve, they can quickly move forward when opportunities like this arise.

Risher expressed contrasting emotions regarding her past sentiments about the seeming hopelessness of these processes. She shared, "It marked a wonderful instance of collective empowerment. From my perspective, such victories have been scarce in this region of southwest Germantown and Nicetown. It's truly thrilling."



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