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Community growth

■ Peter Claver: Helpful center breaks ground

By **Ted Slowik**
STAFF WRITER

for addition

JOLIET — Several years ago, a neighborhood on the city's East Side was overrun with gang members and drug dealers. Violent crimes were a routine occurrence, and many residents moved away in search of safer surroundings.

Youths especially were at risk of getting caught in the cycle of drugs and violence, until community center volunteers pitched in to offer alternatives, including after-school education and recreation programs.

Community leaders gathered Tuesday afternoon on South Chicago Street to recognize the importance of the Peter Claver Center by breaking ground on a \$770,000 building addition.

Center volunteers and staff offer free tutoring, job-placement help, computer training and recreational programs, including karate, to youths and adults.

Though some problems persist, the neighborhood is a lot quieter than it was 10 years ago.

"Every Friday we'd meet with the gangbangers," said City Manager John Mezera. The diligence paid off, and today the East Side neighborhood benefits from new-home construction and rising property values.

The city is paying for the work, which will renovate or add nearly 6,000 square feet to the community center. District 5 Councilman Warren Dorris lobbied for permission to fund the addition using Neighborhood Improvement Program money that typically is used for infrastructure improvements.

"We can build all the new streets and sidewalks, but if we don't help the people walking on those sidewalks, we've got a bunch of new streets and sidewalks and empty people walking on them," Dorris said.

The Peter Claver Center was founded about 45 years ago by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Joliet, said the Rev. Stanley Orlikiewicz, retired pastor of the Cathedral of St. Raymond. The parish helps out with annual holiday food drives at the center.

Before it became a community center, the building at 172 S. Chicago St. housed Joliet's Catholic Youth Organization programs, said state Rep. Jack McGuire, D-Joliet.

About 30 years ago, the diocese transferred ownership to Ozzie and Peggy Mitchell, who have been running the center ever since.

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"A long time ago we talked about this (addition), and people called it our wish list," Peggy Mitchell said.

The city wouldn't be as willing to fund the project were it not for more than \$30 million in annual revenue from casino gambling, which has funded Joliet's minor-league baseball stadium, water park, historical museum and library.

"We're going through a renaissance that is second to none in the state of Illinois," said state Sen. Larry Walsh, D-Elwood. "Joliet's been blessed with a very lucrative gaming industry. A lot of municipalities wouldn't have used the money the same way Joliet has done."

Work on the building addition and renovation of a portion of the existing building is scheduled to be completed by April, Ozzie Mitchell said.

"This is a dream that has come true," he said.

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