

Wednesday, July 14, 2010

Silver Spring Civic Building welcomes guests

Cheers, protests at opening of civic building, plaza

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http://www.gazette.net/stories/07142010/silvnew201503_32533.php



When it officially opened last week, the new Silver Spring Civic Building and Veterans Plaza was touted as a "community living room," a place where all of Silver Spring's distinctive characteristics could come together in a public space.

"This is a place for comments and celebrations, protests and politicians, singing and dancing," said Darian Unger, chairman of the Silver Spring Citizens Advisory Board.

And on Thursday night, it was all of those things.

Hundreds of residents spanning different ages and ethnicities sat in folding chairs on the new plaza, listening to live music as children enjoyed face painting and balloons. Costumed members of Silver Spring's arts and entertainment community performed theatrical songs in front of the building. Residents, County Council members and state officials praised Silver Spring's redevelopment and how their long-held vision for the downtown was coming to fruition.

And there also were protests.

"Youth in Silver Spring cannot wait! We need a place to congregate!" chanted about 15 youth wearing shirts of the Silver Spring Youth Workers Coalition just outside the building. The coalition includes members of Silver Spring youth groups such as the Gandhi Brigade and Community Bridges and is lobbying officials and collecting signatures to make more public space available to teens after the popular artificial turf field was torn up to make way for the civic building.

"If you've been in downtown Silver Spring on a Friday or Saturday, there are kids everywhere," said Lauren Weatherall, a member of the group who works for Silver Spring-based Community Bridges, a nonprofit for underserved girls. "We want a place to go but don't have any constructive space."

The chants of protests came just after a slew of elected officials finished touting the civic building's distinct architecture and civic purpose and just before some of those officials cut a ribbon fashioned like an American flag to officially open the building outside its entrance at the corner of Fenton Street and Ellsworth Drive. Officials mostly ignored the protests, touting the day as a celebration of more than 10 years of planning and civic input and two years of construction for the building and plaza.

"This could not have been constructed without the community's input and support," Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) told about 200 people who had gathered on the new plaza for the event. "This will be our living room, our community table, our community patio."

Veterans Plaza is nearly an acre of paved, public open space covered mostly by a pavilion. In the winter, it will feature an ice-skating rink. Whether or not skateboarding, a popular but mostly unencouraged downtown pastime, will be allowed still is being determined, said Reemberto Rodriguez, the director of the Silver Spring Regional Services Center. As of Monday there were not "No skateboarding signs" on the plaza, and skateboarders have used the space. The plaza will be formally dedicated on Veterans Day this year, Nov. 11, but hosted live music Thursday.

"People will use it the same amount or more" than the artificial turf field the plaza replaced, said Silver Spring resident Tom Lepkowski as he listened to the

funk group The Fabulous Bel-Airs on the plaza with his three young children climbing all over him. "It will be all different types of people."

The 42,000-square-foot civic building includes a large "great hall" available for banquets, performances and meetings, four community-use rooms, an outdoor courtyard in the interior of the building and an atrium and art gallery with pieces from local artists. Former County Executive Douglas M. Duncan began plans for the civic building in 1998 after tearing down the Silver Spring Armory building.

The building cost \$22 million to construct and was designed by Boston-based architects Machado and Silvetti Associates to include a prominent glass front with distinct Brazilian hardwood paneling on the exterior and bamboo and stone floors beneath bright, modern light fixtures on the interior.

"I saw the construction and assumed it was a parking garage," said Silver Spring resident Greta Ehrig as she roamed the building's second floor Thursday evening. "I'm glad it became something else; it's a very nice design."

The Silver Spring Regional Services Center has opened its new offices on the second floor of the building, while performance group Round House Theatre is expected to move into offices and rehearsal space in the building's basement Aug. 1.

In recent weeks, other nonprofit organizations, county council members and, most vocally, the teen protesters Thursday, have questioned why, 10 years ago, the county offered future space in the civic building to Round House at no rent. Other, similar nonprofits must pay to use the building's meeting rooms, they say.

"We want this to serve the community rather than just be a place to rent," said Richard Jaeggi, executive director of the Gandhi Brigade, a Silver Spring youth group that uses media to enact social change.

Finding space to hold meetings and events is the most difficult challenge for county nonprofits, said Frankie Blackburn, executive director of IMPACT Silver Spring. IMPACT, which has provided services to low-income and minority families since 1999, often meets in church basements, park basketball courts and the laundry rooms of apartment buildings in order to reach its

members, said Blackburn, who has asked the county to reconsider the building's rental fees.

Round House, which manned a booth offering magic tricks, children's games and prizes Thursday, is negotiating the terms of its lease with the county. It now occupies theaters and offices in Silver Spring and Bethesda and an education center in Silver Spring without paying rent to the county, in exchange for the arts and educational services it offers.

"I don't know why some people fail to recognize our education and outreach as programming. It is. And it's of tremendous benefit to the community," Round House Artistic Director Blake Robison wrote in an e-mail to The Gazette, nonprofit organizations and county officials.

Gary Stith, who was director of the Silver Spring Regional Services Center when the original civic building plans were made, said Round House was chosen because the county needed a reliable tenant to occupy the building's basement. When designing a public building, Stith said, it's difficult to please everyone. Thursday was proof of that.

"In working with the community, if all the uses people wanted were in the building, it would have been an 11-story building," said Stith, who now works for the county's Department of General Services but is retiring this week. "It just isn't possible."