



PHOTOS BY PHILIP KAMRASS/TIMES UNION

MARK BOBB-SEMPLÉ, left, Alice Green and Willie White stand across from the former bank building that will house the African-American Cultural Center of the Capital Region, at Madison Avenue and South Pearl Streets. Below is a view of the building's lobby.

Banking on a 'place of pride'

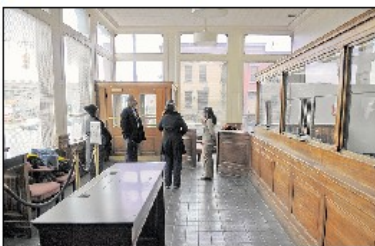
Organizers optimistic about African-American Cultural Center

By Paul Grondahl

ALBANY — The future home of the African-American Cultural Center of the Capital Region will fill a former Key Bank branch at one of downtown's busiest intersections, the corner of Madison Avenue and South Pearl Street.

A trio of black community activists leading the effort consider the central location fitting, given the ambitious plans they have for the four-story, 19th-century brick building. They purchased the building and a vacant adjacent lot last month for about \$100,000, with the help of a loan.

In addition to exhibit space, they envision a theater, dance



studio, library and archives, community meeting space, gift shop and offices.

"This building has such prominence and it's an exciting project that brought us together," said Alice Green, founder of the Center for Law and Justice and one of the project's prime mov-

ers. "We decided it was time we had ownership in our community as an ethnic group. We also wanted to find a way to be much more positive so both children and adults can learn about and celebrate their history."

The other two organizations behind the project are the South

End neighborhood group AVillage Inc. and Too Deep Entertainment — An Urban Arts Experience.

The collaboration was spurred, in part, by the January grand opening of a new, year-round Irish American Cultural Museum on Broadway a few blocks away.

"We want to share our culture and history and teach about our black ancestors," said Willie White, executive director of AVillage Inc. "There's no single location where that can be found right now. We're creating another positive project for the South End. It shows once again that we're on the rise."

"I want to use this center to extend the ways we use theater as a form of expression and a way of educating our teens," said Mark

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Organizers open to ideas

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Bobb-Semple, founder and artistic director of Too Deep Entertainment — An Urban Arts Experience.

The organizers want to offer more than a history lesson. They hope the cultural center will become a place of inspiration that gives teenagers an uplifting alternative that eclipses the allure of fast money seen in images of drug dealing and gang activity.

"This will become a place of pride," Bobb-Semple said. "This will allow teenagers to connect the dots of African-American history so that they can see where they came from while helping them figure out where they're going. It's long overdue"

"This center will also be a safe place where the African-American community can come together as a group and feel like they're invested in their neighborhood," Green said.

The organizers are confident they can make a go of the project after a previous effort to start a cultural center for the black community fizzled. A six-member board of



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THE PLANNED African-American Cultural Center in Albany is designed to give young people inspiration and a chance to appreciate history.

directors has been meeting weekly to discuss fundraising and next steps. They've also begun preliminary discussions with 3t Architects of Albany about renovating of the space and building an addition on the vacant lot.

The organizers said they've received a warm reception from folks when they describe plans for the cultural center. Already, several people have offered to bring in family artifacts and other items

of historic interest to the local African-American community.

"This is in the earliest stages and we're just starting community outreach," White said.

"We're scheduling a series of community conversations," Bobb-Semple said. "We're open to ideas. We want to build something that the community wants."

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