

The DOWNTOWN GAZETTE

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GAZETTE NEWSPAPERS

PHILANTHROPY PROJECT AT SEVENTH, MAIN

Willmore Association Leads Beautification

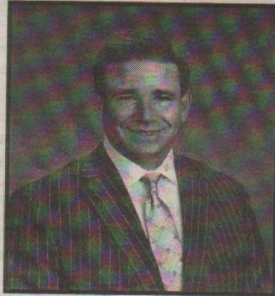
By Darcy Leigh Richardson
Editor

The Willmore City Heritage Association (WCHA) may not have a sizeable balance in its bank account, but the sweat equity of its members has been enough capital to convince prominent city institutions to invest in its vision.

From 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday, March 5, a ribbon-cutting celebration will announce the completion of Phase 2 of the 7th and Maine Beautification Project, a WCHA effort launched nearly a year ago. The project is a community-based initiative focused on cleaning, landscaping and beautifying an abandoned area located directly north of the West Seventh Street and Maine Avenue intersection (at the northbound 710 Freeway on-ramp).

According to Jim Danno, community outreach coordinator for WCHA, the project couldn't have progressed without the assistance of a few donors of money, management and materials. W. Henry Walker, CEO of Farmers & Merchants Bank (F&M), not only donated \$11,000 to the beautification effort, but he recommended Rick Roseman, a contractor with Enviro Engineering. Roseman's approach reduced the cost of removing a thick layer of concrete from \$33,000 (the WCHA's initial bidder) to approximately \$11,000.

Walker, the fourth-generation F&M CEO, said one of the unique aspects of his job is the glimpse into clients' problems, worries and dreams when they come in for consultations about banking services.



W. HENRY WALKER

F&M's history of community involvement and philanthropy melded with Walker's desire to see downtown neighborhoods become more vibrant when WCHA members approached him about the beautification project.

"I was invited out to see the (7th and Maine project's) first phase," Walker said. "I could see their vision and their dream... I live in downtown and I've worked on and off in downtown for the past 23 years, and I'd like to see (the city) figure out a way for communities to come together and become vibrant."

Danno said Phase 1 began last spring, when the dilapi-

dated Maine Avenue barricades at Seventh Street were replaced with 14 concrete planters filled with colorful succulents and a seating area, turning the dead-end into a residential cul-de-sac. Kathleen Irvine, WCHA vice president and landscape designer, contributed her talents, and other neighbors pitched in with the cleanup and planting. The city's Public Works Department gave the group old, unused concrete planters.

Phase 2 involved the installation of a drought-tolerant landscape with a state-of-the-art inline drip irrigation system. However, before Phase 2 could begin, WCHA ran into a roadblock — a thick slab of concrete needed to be removed to make the vision work. Initially, the concrete was thought to be 3 inches deep, and instead turned out to be triple that measurement.

"I saw this as an opportunity to donate," Walker said. "Originally the (bid) was \$5,000, but then the (extra concrete) wound up raising the cost to \$11,000... The costs were covered with money from the bank."

Danno said Phase 3 will include painting a community mural along the 8-foot-tall, 160-foot-wide brick wall next to the native plantings. Since WCHA began the project, Danno said the wall hasn't been tagged with graffiti.

"This area will be a gateway entrance to the Cesar Chavez/Drake Park expansion project," Danno said. "We're seeking a grant to have a wrought-iron gate and other historical elements ...and one of the exits from the city of Long Beach will leave people with a beautiful impression."

Other contributors to the project's success include the city's Department of Parks, Recreation and Marine; the Redevelopment Agency (RDA); the Downtown Long Beach Associates (DLBA); the city's Office of Sustainability; Kellogg Garden Products; Ewing Irrigation; Netafilm USA; and Blue Gecko Design.

For more information, visit the website www.willmorecity.org.

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