

Putting soul back in Soulsville

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Once the home of R&B legends like Isaac Hayes and Earth Wind & Fire, the **Soulsville** neighborhood saw its share of hard times before the opening of the Stax Museum of American Soul Music in 2003.

The next step in the rejuvenation of the neighborhood, located along East McLemore between Neptune and College streets, is construction on the new **Towne Center** at **Soulsville**, which will begin later this month.

Towne Center, a 77,000-square-foot retail and office center, will include a grocery store, day spa, food court and restaurant that will give residents a place to shop and dine, and give Stax Museum visitors a place to go to after they leave the museum.

The \$11 million project should be completed and open by May 2009. Jeffrey Higgs, executive director of the LeMoyné-Owen College Community Development Corp., says these businesses will bring 179 new jobs to the neighborhood, which is home to 11,000 people. The LeMoyné-Owen CDC is developing and leasing the project.

The center is already 70% leased, he says, with part of the remaining 30% possibly being occupied by a bank. The grocery store, to be called the Williams **Soulsville** Apple Market, is owned by Michael Williams, who also owns an Apple Market at Winchester and Tchulahoma. Ironically, Williams worked at the Big Star grocery store that used to be in the neighborhood during his youth.

Higgs says the idea for **Towne Center** began in 1999 and took numerous shapes before the final design was settled on.

"When I first got here, there were a lot of plans but not a lot going on," Higgs says. "We had all these people who wanted to do stuff, but no one to stir it up, so we wanted to get them together to see what would happen."

Once everyone got together, he realized his job would be similar to a "spoon in a gumbo pot."

"You have all this stuff, but if you don't keep stirring it, you'll burn it," he says.

Higgs brought in [Self Tucker Architects](#), whose principals are familiar with the neighborhood. Jimmie Tucker grew up there and had always wanted to do projects there, while Juan Self, who grew up in Clarksdale, Miss., visited family friends and relatives there growing up and remembered what the neighborhood used to be before Stax Records went bankrupt.

"The entire area that we call **Soulsville** was very vibrant," Self says. "It was mixed-use and mixed-income like many black neighborhoods before integration, but once other neighborhoods opened up, people moved to suburbs and other parts of the city."

Self theorizes black exodus to the suburbs left an economic void in the area, similar to many inner-city communities across the country.

Higgs says Stax Museum has steadily increased attendance since it opened, hosting more than 40,000 visitors in 2007, so anything that could keep those visitors in the neighborhood contributing to the economy would be a big plus. In addition, the CDC owned most of the land **Towne Center** would be built on.

He says the original plan was for a 100,000-square-foot facility to be built across the street from the museum, but that idea was "right-sized" for maximum impact.

Similar to revitalization projects in Philadelphia, Cincinnati and St. Louis, the **Towne Center** approach is to spur economic development. However, those cities don't have a resource like Stax Museum, or the history of **Soulsville**.

"Many of the Stax musicians were part of the neighborhood and their houses still exist, even though the neighborhood has changed dramatically," Self says. "With all the change, it isn't so far down that it can't be brought back."

Stax musicians like Booker T. Jones of Booker T. and the MGs literally walked in off the street looking for opportunities. Self says the neighborhood could be a tourist destination for walking tours of artists' old homes.

Higgs says another historical center of the **Soulsville** neighborhood is LeMoyne-Owen College, whose presence sparked some of the \$4 million in government grants that are helping to pay for it. Other financing comes from the City of **Memphis**, Shelby County, the [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development](#) and [Wachovia Bank](#).

"The college is the anchor in the neighborhood and we looked at what we could do around this 140-year old institution to bring it back," Higgs says.

One thing that Higgs didn't initially want in the project, but eventually changed his mind about, was new housing. The project will include 14 market-rate houses that will be about 2,000 square feet in size and range in price from \$175,000-\$190,000. He says some professors at LeMoyne-Owen have already committed to purchasing homes.

"I initially didn't want to do housing, but I realized that some people accumulate wealth through their homes," he says. "These homes will be designed for people who can live anywhere in the county, but choose to live here."

Tucker says the project will be a good complement to Stax for both the neighborhood and tourists.

"It is bringing much needed services that are lacking in the neighborhood, and there will also be jobs coming to the community, so it will be a plus on many different levels," Tucker says.

Self Tucker is working on its own housing developments in the neighborhood.

"You're starting to see more mixed-income families moving to the area along with the people that are buying houses and fixing them up," Self says.

Higgs says revitalization of the neighborhood could create a safe neighborhood with decent housing that is a black cultural center, but at the same time is inviting to everyone who visits it. He says there are also plans for construction and hospitality training facilities in the area, and neighborhood residents will be involved in the construction.

"We had to make sure we included the people in the neighborhood because the mission of the CDC is housing, economic and community development," Higgs says. "You can't leave the people behind. You have to develop them right along with the houses."

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