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## CITYSPACE

### Centennial City



## Turning the zoo and area attractions into a comprehensive destination.

by Bruce Andersen

**Zoobilation: Current redevelopment plans in West Philadelphia and Parkside would transform the Girard Avenue corridor, ending at the doorstep of the zoo.**

Photo By: Michael T. Regan

A transformation that has been many years in the making is finally blossoming in the Mantua and Parkside neighborhoods around the west side of Fairmount Park. These neighborhoods, sorely in need of revitalization, have reached critical mass in terms of having enough attractions to bring many different users to the area on a continual basis. This is spurring some creative thinking on how to bring economic development, community revitalization and holistic transit planning to the neighborhood. Many people are working hard to see that this happens, and the rapid pace of change has created an air of excitement in this locale.

The Please Touch Museum, Philadelphia Zoo, Mann Center, Fairmount Park Commission and others are discussing creation of a "Centennial District." It is envisioned as redeveloping the area with an emphasis on the visitor attractions, the business the visitors bring and the restoration of the Mantua and Parkside neighborhoods. This new "plan in progress" may one day resemble the Center City or University City districts, or evolve into a cultural district like those in San Francisco and New York.

Current redevelopment plans in West Philadelphia and Parkside would transform the Girard Avenue corridor to focus on the area from the Delaware River to the Schuylkill River. The new corridor ends just east of the new Centennial District, at the doorstep of the zoo.

The zoo has been a long-term advocate of development. Currently, most visitors arrive at the zoo by car. This is also true for both the Mann Center and the Please Touch Museum. This is not expected to change when the museum moves, but one of the major projects being worked on by the zoo is an intermodal transportation hub to improve the transportation options that people use to get to the area.

The major aspects of the hub will be a multistory garage on the south side of Girard Avenue, with new surface parking on the north side of the street; the rechristening of the Route 15 trolley line down Girard Avenue with a new zoo stop; improvement of the bike paths on the Schuylkill River Trail and the West Bank Greenway; and a shuttle from 30th Street Station to accommodate rail passengers. Two buses run past the area, but more mass transit options are needed. There are plans to include a commuter rail station to be implemented once enough money is found for needed infrastructure improvements.

A key part to making the area a "destination" is the linkages between the attractions. Although the existing attractions are physically very close together, it is not easy to move between them, or to get to them from elsewhere in the city, so they have long been perceived as separate, distant locations. The planned relocation of the Please Touch Museum to Memorial Hall in Fairmount Park has spurred efforts to integrate these sites. The addition of the museum to the existing attractions (the Mann Center, the Philadelphia Zoo and Fairmount Park) has prompted local stakeholders to work together to make the area a "family destination" and more visitor friendly.

The safety and beauty of those linkages is very important. Currently the stretch of Girard between the Schuylkill River and 40th Street is being landscaped and the walkways are being upgraded to improve pedestrian and traffic safety. Likewise, linking the Art Museum, Kelly Drive path, Boathouse Row and Waterworks on the east side of the Schuylkill with the attractions in the Centennial District is also being discussed. Although separated by the river, physically they are very close, so don't be surprised if one day there is a skyway between the Art Museum and the zoo.

Over the years, residents and local business owners have made an enormous commitment to the neighborhood. The efforts of Jim Brown and the Parkside Historic Preservation Corp. are just one example. Many of the changes are meant



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to the mix are the Negro League Memorial dedicated to the southwest corner of Belmont and Parkside avenues, at Stars' old school at Girard and 41st Street. The Fairmount Park Commission, an agency charged with the responsibility of developing a strategic plan for the park. It is an underutilized, underfunded park that needs to be taken into an entity that attracts both Philadelphians and tourists.

The high copper dome of Memorial Hall has a statue, visible for miles, of the mythical figure Columbia bearing a laurel branch, which signifies accomplishment. Columbia and the success she represents is a fitting symbol of the confluence of events that is the rebirth of the City of Philadelphia.

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