

Angels among them

Guardian Angels offer to set up shop at stalled retail project in gang-plagued and revitalization-hungry Columbia Heights

By Sean Madigan
Washington Business Journal

Oct. 6 — Escalating gang violence and a rash of graffiti are hardly selling points for Columbia Heights, an area of Northwest D.C. that's been crawling toward revitalization for years.

But the Guardian Angels, the New York group known for its citizen foot patrols and red beret-clad volunteers, wants to help.

"We have to be there 24-7, 3-6-5 ... just the way a firehouse would be," says Curtis Sliwa, the group's president and founder.

The Guardian Angels is in negotiations with the National Capital Revitalization Corp. to use the former Payless Shoes store at 14th Street and Park Road as its Columbia Heights headquarters. The store, which is part of Grid Properties' proposed \$140 million D.C. USA retail and entertainment project, is empty and likely won't be used for months. (Developers were denied a \$73 million tax subsidy earlier this year and are awaiting a decision on another financing proposal.)

"These fellas can really contribute," says Councilman Jim Graham, D-Ward 1. "This is a good location for them."

The Guardian Angels made a name for itself by working with street gangs and fending off muggers in New York's subways in the early 1980s. It is looking to do the same thing in Columbia Heights -- gang mediation and neighborhood foot patrol -- especially near the Columbia Heights Metro station.

"They should give them the space and they shouldn't charge them anything," says Dianne Clark, president of the Columbia Heights Association of Merchants and Professionals. "Seriously, it should be free. They are doing a service in the community."

Though Clark hasn't heard from her membership that the escalating violence has been a problem for local businesses, she says, "personally, I would welcome [the Guardian Angels'] presence in the area."

NCRC spokeswoman Peggy Armstrong says the groups are negotiating some issues, including insurance.

In addition to the D.C. USA site, NCRC controls a number of vacant properties along 14th Street, most of which are in the early stages of development.

NCRC should be well aware of rising violence in Columbia Heights. In July, when the government-sponsored economic development agency's board met in Columbia Heights, police had part of 14th Street blocked off to attend to a shooting.

Sliwa says the Guardian Angels could move in tomorrow. And although he knows they may have to move out any time, he knows he can't afford to be picky.

"We're a nonprofit," Sliwa says. "We don't have a huge bank account."

The group is looking for a yearlong lease using the space for free, but paying rent in "sweat equity."

"We'll do all the heavy lifting not many other people are willing to do," Sliwa adds. "It's not going to cost anybody anything."

John Ayala leads the local Guardian Angels chapter. He along with his wife, Wanda, are two of the group's 30 local members. The D.C. chapter is based at 15th and K streets SE. John Ayala says a Columbia Heights location would help the organization recruit more local volunteers, especially Latino residents.

"That would be an excellent spot for us," he says. "If you've got an office there, it makes [recruiting] easier ... I think we might get it."